

Reaffirming the General Assembly's Futility

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, NOV 13 2013

In a history plagued with inaction, uncertainty, and a lack of consensus on human rights issues and abuses, the United Nations again proved its ineptitude this week by awarding seats on its Human Rights Council to China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Cuba and Algeria. If you need to read that again to make sure I am being serious, feel free.

The Council's members are elected by the UN General Assembly for a 3-year term. The 47-seat Geneva-based Council is said to be a pivotal body in monitoring and inspecting accusations of human rights abuses across the world, and in protecting the values of human security and rights on behalf of the UN General Assembly. There are no veto votes on the Council, so a majority can still lean the Council in the right direction, but one wonders exactly how and why anyone would think it to be a good idea for states of this type to be awarded anything related to human rights, other than perhaps a "worst violators club" award.

It should also be noted that China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Algeria have refused to let UN officials visit to investigate claims of rights abuses, some reports dating back to 2000. Yet, in the infinite wisdom of the General Assembly, these states should be at the table when discussing and debating action on rights at the international level, when they seem entirely disinterested with protecting them or even recognizing them at home.

It should not come as a total surprise, as this is not the first time the General Assembly has made an absurd decision. It could be argued that by making each of these states a part of the Council that best practices and international scrutiny will improve their domestic rights record, and that there may be a greater likelihood of those states allowing access for UN investigators if they intended to appear as a legitimate player on the Council. The greater political point here may just be that the General Assembly is seeking to coerce these states into greater rights protection and enforcement rather than simply making a bad decision, and that the cynics are too jaded to see the true motivations here. Value transference could be an outcome of this decision, but history tells a very different story.

I suppose there is validity to the argument that greater attention may lead to better enforcement, but I am doubtful this is likely to happen in any meaningful way. Russia, with a few months left to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, intends to keep its bigoted anti-gay laws in place, almost daring the international community to do something about it so close to the Olympic Games – because the Olympics are clearly far more important than the rights of gay individuals in Russia, it seems. The reality here is that these 6 states are well-known historical abusers of rights and are responsible for the suffering and murder of innocent people. Further, it is worth noting that China and Russia in particular have consistently expressed their dissatisfaction with the basic definitions of human rights articulated by the UN, thus making enforcement exceptionally difficult when they refuse to agree to what a human right is in the first place. The abuses of rights these states commit are not limited to history, and they continue in many cases today. They have not earned any sort of credibility on rights issues and even allowing them into the room is an insult to us all.

Take solace in knowing that the General Assembly and its appendages have limited impact on world affairs and struggle to gain legitimacy. If you are wondering why, look no further than the newly appointed champions of human rights. Above all else, this election serves as a reminder that the Security Council is truly the sole body of decision-making at the UN, and that even the UN's own membership does not take seriously the values it tries to espouse.

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