



NGO Coalition Demands Improvements by HRC Candidates

Iran withdraws due to mounting global opposition

Countries seeking election fail to meet membership standards

Candidates for the United Nations Human Rights Council should meet the standards for council membership even when running unopposed, a global coalition of human rights organizations said today. The General Assembly resolution that established the council states that members shall uphold the "highest standards" of human rights, but at least five of the candidates in this year's election fall short of that threshold, the coalition said.

"States should press candidates to take concrete steps to meet membership standards for the council, and make it clear that their votes depend on it," said Hassan Shire Sheikh, director of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network. "The General Assembly set a high threshold for membership in the council, and has a duty to enforce it."

On May 13, 2010, member nations of the UN General Assembly in New York will elect 14 new members to the 47-member Human Rights Council, the UN's leading human rights body, which meets in Geneva. The make-up of the council reflects the UN's geographic composition, and seats are allotted by regional group.

For the first time, each UN geographical region has put forward "clean slates" with only as many candidates as vacancies. Without competitive elections, states are deprived of the chance to select the candidates best suited to serve on the council. However, the balloting process for the council requires states to cast their votes by writing in the names of the candidates they select. A member can only be elected by an affirmative vote of more than half of the overall UN membership.

In [letters to UN member states](#), the NGO Coalition for an Effective Human Rights Council expressed concern that the human rights records of Angola, Libya, Malaysia, Thailand, and Uganda currently fall short of the standards set for council membership, including the obligation that they uphold the "highest standards" of human rights and that they "fully cooperate" with the council. The coalition urged UN member states to push those countries to take concrete steps to address human rights concerns, and to withhold their votes from countries that do not take such action. In particular, the coalition stressed that states seeking election should make an explicit commitment to cooperate fully with human rights experts appointed by the council and to provide immediate access to UN experts seeking to visit.

"When a state seeks a seat on the council, the least it should do is open its doors to the council's own experts," said Peggy Hicks, Global Advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. "But many of the candidates running this year have stalled on



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requests by council experts to visit. This is a problem that can and should be addressed before Thursday's election."

The General Assembly resolution that created the Human Rights Council in 2006 envisioned an election process in which states would compete for membership based on the contribution they would make to promoting human rights, and states would issue pledges and commitments that UN members should consider in casting their votes. That process has deteriorated as fewer states have competed each year.

Five countries were running for seats from the UN's Asia region, but Iran withdrew from the race on April 23 in the face of mounting global opposition based on its record of severe human rights abuses, rather than face likely defeat in the General Assembly. Successful campaigns have led to the defeat of states with poor human rights records, including Belarus in 2007, Sri Lanka in 2008, and Azerbaijan in 2009, when those states faced competitive races in their regions.

"Iran's withdrawal showed that international pressure can improve the membership of the council, and demonstrated the importance of competitive elections for seats," said Bahey el-din Hassan, director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS). Four remaining Asia region states - Malaysia, Maldives, Qatar, and Thailand - now seek the four seats from that region.

"Malaysia should immediately end the use of all preventive detention laws, and repeal laws that restrict freedom of expression and academic freedom," said Yap Swee Seng, executive director of Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), citing two of the specific concerns expressed by the coalition in its letter regarding Malaysia.

"Thailand should fully investigate the past deaths of 20 human rights defenders, conduct effective investigations into major human rights abuses in the deep south, lift press censorship, and repeal laws limiting the right to free expression."

Angola, Libya, Mauritania, and Uganda have been endorsed by the Africa regional group as an official "clean slate" for the four open seats for that region. "Angola should immediately cease forced evictions without adequate compensation, release human rights defenders jailed in the Cabinda region, cease mass deportations of foreign migrants, and move to amend its press law to decriminalize defamation," said Shire, whose organization is based in Kampala. "Uganda should make torture a domestic criminal offense, allow the Uganda Human Rights Commission and independent NGOs access to all detainees, and actively cooperate with the International Criminal Court and other international investigations of war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity."

The NGO coalition also called on Uganda to withdraw bills pending in its parliament that would unduly restrict print media and nongovernmental organizations, permit forced HIV testing, and criminalize practices related to homosexuality.



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Speaking for the coalition, Hassan of the Cairo Institute called on Libya to "reveal the fate of hundreds who were 'disappeared' and prosecute those responsible, release hundreds of Abu Salim prisoners who completed their sentences or were acquitted, repeal laws that criminalize freedom of expression and association, and cease mistreatment of migrants."

Ecuador and Guatemala are the only states running for the two Latin American seats this year. In the Western European and Other group, only Spain and Switzerland are running for the region's two open seats, and in the Eastern European group, only Moldova and Poland now seek the two available seats, Croatia having withdrawn in February.

"The Western European and Other group had competitive races every year until 2009, and the Eastern Europeans had spirited contests every year until this year," said Dokhi Fassihian, executive director of the Democracy Coalition Project. "States in every region that care about human rights should be willing to stand for election and compete on their records."

The coalition noted that other candidate countries should also be pressed to improve their human rights records, and to fully cooperate with the council. The coalition chose to focus on five of the candidates based on the availability of direct research concerning the human rights situation in those countries and the extent of the human rights concerns identified.