

NGO Coalition for an Effective Human Rights Council
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For Immediate Release

UN: Lack of Competition Mars Vote on Human Rights Council

US Re-Engagement and Defeat of Azerbaijan Are Positive Results

(New York, May 12, 2009) – The United Nations General Assembly’s election of Human Rights Council members today was marred by lack of competition in three of the five UN regional groups, the NGO Coalition for an Effective Human Rights Council said. Although Azerbaijan was defeated in a competitive election, other rights abusers benefited from the lack of choices, said the human rights groups.

In most regions, the number of candidates was equal to the number of open seats, leaving General Assembly members without a choice of candidates. Only 20 countries competed for 18 open seats on the 47-member council.

The groups said that the US decision to run for the council for the first time was a positive step, but that a lack of competition among Western countries sent the wrong message. New Zealand withdrew its candidacy the day the US announced it was running for the council, allowing the US to be elected unopposed.

“Competition resulted in the defeat of countries like Belarus, Iran, Venezuela, and Sri Lanka in past years, and Azerbaijan this year,” said Yap Swee Seng, executive director of Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA). “Countries that care about human rights should take note and come forward to challenge and defeat rights abusers in future elections.”

General Assembly members rejected Azerbaijan’s candidacy in a competitive election in which three candidates competed for the two open seats reserved for Eastern European countries. Civil society members in Azerbaijan had urged General Assembly members not to vote for their country because of its deteriorating rights situation, and international advocates had joined their call. The General Assembly elected Russia with 146 votes and Hungary with 131. Azerbaijan, with 89 votes, did not even reach the 97-vote threshold necessary for election.

“Today’s voting should act as a wake-up call to Azerbaijan to improve its rights record and give hope to Azerbaijani human rights defenders and journalists who called for their country’s defeat,” said Igor Blazevic, head of the human rights and democracy department of People in Need. “Azerbaijan’s defeat shows that states will elect a country with a better rights record when given a choice.”

This year, international human rights organizations opposed the election of Azerbaijan, China, Cuba, Russia, and Saudi Arabia to the Human Rights Council because of their

persistent serious human rights violations. With the exception of Azerbaijan, all were elected to the council. But Saudi Arabia, China, and Cuba came in at the very bottom of their regional slates.

“If there had been a competitive election in these groups, those countries could have been defeated,” said Steve Crawshaw, UN advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. “The absence of competition is damaging. Governments need to make clear that competition matters.”

In the Asian region, the NGO coalition opposed bids by China and Saudi Arabia for seats on the council, but both were elected without opposing candidates, with just five countries running for five seats.

“Saudi Arabia is not the best that Asia – or the Middle East – has to offer,” said Bahey el-din Hassan, director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. “In its first term on the council, Saudi Arabia failed entirely to live up to the obligations and commitments required of it as a council member – given its re-election, it must deliver real reform, rather than empty promises.”

When they created the Human Rights Council in 2006, UN states required that General Assembly members take into account candidates’ human rights records in casting their votes. Council members are required to “uphold the highest standards” of human rights and “fully cooperate” with the council. In order to win, each candidate must secure an absolute majority of the General Assembly members – 97 votes.

“China and Russia are among the most powerful countries in the world, but countries could have used the secret ballot to withhold the necessary votes from both based on their extremely poor rights record,” said Paula Schreifer, advocacy director at Freedom House. “That countries rewarded rights abusers with votes suggests that countries from every region need to reconsider their commitment to the promotion of human rights and the credibility of the Human Rights Council.”

In Latin America, Mexico, Uruguay, and Cuba were all elected in a non-competitive election for the region’s three open seats.

“For the past three years, Latin American countries have rotated council seats among them, rather than compete,” said Lorena Fries, president of Corporación Humanas Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género. “This year, the Latin American region, which has so many countries that are leaders on human rights, allowed Cuba, the only country to repress nearly all forms of political dissent, to stroll into the council with no reforms or concrete steps toward change.”

For the very first time, Africa presented a competitive slate for the council elections with six candidates for five seats. UN members elected Senegal (165), Mauritius (162), Nigeria (148), Cameroon (142), and Djibouti (141), while Kenya failed to win election with 133 votes.

“African countries marked an important milestone today with their first competitive election for the Human Rights Council,” said Hassan Shire Sheikh, chairperson of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network. “We hope to see many more elections that permit countries to compete on their rights records and allow the world community as a whole to choose the best Africa has to offer.”

A “closed slate” from the Western European and Other Group – the United States, Belgium, and Norway – all won more than the 97 votes required for election.

“We wish all five regions had competed for election, as contemplated when the council was established,” said Maja Daruwala, director of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative. “This year, by failing to compete, Western countries undermined their credibility to encourage rights-respecting countries to compete with abusive regimes, which will haunt them next year when Iran is likely to run for the council.”

Having secured 167 votes, the United States will join the Human Rights Council for the first time.

“The election of the United States to the council is a positive step toward US reengagement in multilateral institutions,” said Dokhi Fassihian, executive director of Democracy Coalition Project. “Now, the US must demonstrate its commitment to ‘fully cooperate’ with the council, by issuing an invitation to the UN’s independent human rights experts to visit US detention facilities, including Guantanamo Bay.”

The groups urged more nations to come forward for next year’s election when the General Assembly will again elect one-third of the council’s members.

“The defeat of Azerbaijan should be the impetus for more contested elections to the Human Rights Council,” said Luis Arriaga Valenzuela, director of the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center (Center Prodh). “We hope to see competition in all the world’s regions in 2010.”

For profiles of human rights conditions in countries running for the Human Rights Council, please visit:

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