

## UN voting patterns tell tales of the Commonwealth Nations and Their Real Commitment to Human Rights

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If actions speak louder than words human rights protection in the 53 countries of the Commonwealth is treading on thin ice. An analysis of voting patterns at the UN's Third Committee done by the New York based Democracy Coalition Project shows big gaps between the Commonwealth's rhetoric and reality. The Democracy Coalition Project analysed six recent resolutions connected to human rights and democracy. Five related to human rights violations in Iran, North Korea, Myanmar, Belarus and Uzbekistan. The sixth resolution sought a blanket ban on "preventing politically motivated and biased country specific resolutions and confrontational approaches".

Shorn of its diplomatic veneer "The Resolution on the Promotion of Equitable and Mutually Respectful Dialogue on Human Rights" basically tried to put a stop to the valuable UN practice of naming and shaming countries in an international setting for what they do to their people at home.

The Third Committee focuses on human rights issues and on the reports of the "special procedures of the newly established human rights council." Amongst its one hundred and ninety-two members are members of the Commonwealth who have a special mandate to promote and protect human rights because 13 sit on the Human Rights Council and the nine sit on the Commonwealth's own watchdog mechanism the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group. These members have dual mandates to protect human rights.

Their voting record however did little to bolster faith that this responsibility weighed heavily with them.

Of those on the Human Rights Council, Canada and the UK opposed this dilution of human rights accountability. However, India, Malaysia, Pakistan South Africa and Sri Lanka voted to weaken human rights accountability. Bangladesh, Ghana Mauritius and Nigeria abstained while Cameroon and Zambia were absent. Of the CMAG members only Canada, Malta and the UK voted against any dilution of this process while Lesotho, Malaysia, St Lucia and Sri Lanka voted to get rid of country specific criticisms. Papua New Guinea and the United Republic of Tanzania abstained.

Margins matter. There was only a one-vote difference between CMAG members voting for and against the motion to name and shame or not. But taken together with absentees and abstainers the margin of disagreement goes up; with two thirds of Commonwealth's human rights protectors voting in favour weakening the UN's ability to call countries to account.

Standards should matter, or they have no meaning. Protection of human rights is one of the core aspects of the Harare Declaration which proclaims its fundamental political values. Member states who persistently violate its standards face suspension or expulsion. Suspect states are kept on a CMAG watch list. Pakistan and Nigeria have both had spells of suspension. UN mechanisms for *examining* human rights records are stronger than those of the Commonwealth but few consequences flow even when reports are grim. At best violating governments get rapped knuckles when they are specifically named for really bad behaviour. Despite their higher Commonwealth standards most Commonwealth

members were happy to try to reduce even the little embarrassment naming a country for human rights violations causes.

Such schizophrenic behaviour puts in doubt whether there is indeed any Commonwealth standard on human rights and if there is, should there not be mechanisms that insist it be demonstrated globally?

If the guardians of state accountability sleep on their watch it does not bode well for the UN either. The present voting also betrays the promise that “members elected to the Council shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights” and lends validity to fears that like its predecessor, the new Council may fail to serve the keep countries that are insensitive to human rights out of its membership .At the UN human rights is much the hand maiden of foreign policy imperatives. Resolution and voting patterns are guided by more real *politik* concerns and bloc alliances than by any genuine commitment to an international gold standard on human rights. The Commonwealth members voting record just lends a few more nails to the coffin of the burgeoning hope that the new Human Rights Council would be able to hold violating countries effectively to account for inflicting pain and suffering on their peoples. Perhaps the next round will nail it down.