

OPEd

Take back the U.N. ; Democratic nations must form an independent caucus

Nancy E. Soderberg, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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Just as the United Nations is preparing to face two important tests of its relevance - how it will deal with crises in Iraq and North Korea - one of its key bodies just voted itself into irrelevancy. On Jan. 20, the 53-nation Human Rights Commission elected Libya its 2003 chairman. Libya is a country still under U.N. sanction for terrorism, with a human- rights record that Human Rights Watch calls "appalling," and which will use its new position to block the committee from taking any meaningful action. What's wrong with the United Nations?

Since the end of the Cold War, the member-states of the United Nations have let the body's repressive regimes hold much of the United Nations hostage to their agenda. Undemocratic regimes win positions on key U.N. bodies and then block any criticism of their actions or those of their dictatorial colleagues. The Human Rights Commission, now chaired by Libya, for instance, also includes Algeria, China, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria and Zimbabwe. Not coincidentally, repressive regimes avoid censure. Similarly, at the General Assembly, of the 59 resolutions on which roll-call votes were taken during the 2001 session, nearly half dealt with Israel, while the General Assembly remained silent on the actions of many ruthless, undemocratic regimes. Finally, while the U.S. managed to keep Sudan off the Security Council in 2000, Syria was nominated the following year and is now ensconced on the Council for two years.

At the United Nations, five regional groups control nominations to various U.N. bodies. A recent bipartisan task force, Enhancing U.S. Leadership at the United Nations, cosponsored by Freedom House and the Council on Foreign Relations, found that the United Nations' regional group structure "tends disproportionately to benefit regimes that are less than open and democratic." In fact, Iraq currently leads the Asia group.

In addition, the 64-member non-aligned movement (NAM), a Cold War holdover created to serve as a counter-weight to the East and West blocs, clings to an anachronistic 1960s mentality. NAM members cooperate on substantive and procedural votes - and often follow the lead of the group's undemocratic regimes. The result is that the NAM regularly impedes U.N. actions, advancing the interests of the group's few dictatorships to the disadvantage of the group's many democracies.

The task force report calls for a new strategy to advance the interests of the United States at the United Nations. The report recommends the creation of a coalition of democratic U.N. members that would join together to support three key goals: bolstering democracy and democratic principles; advancing human rights; and fighting terrorism. This "democracy caucus" could counter the small but effective group of regimes that often thwart U.S. interests.

The U.S. war on terrorism would be won much faster, and Iraq would have been disarmed more effectively, if all U.N. member- states shared these basic principles: respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Today, although 63 percent of the 191 governments represented at the United Nations are electoral democracies and 45 percent are labeled as "liberal democracies," they make no effort to bond together to promote their shared principles. As U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has noted, only "when the United Nations can truly call itself a community of democracies [will] the charter's noble ideals of protecting human rights and promoting 'social progress in larger freedoms' " be achievable.

To help achieve that goal, a "democracy caucus" at the United Nations should actively oppose the candidacies of nations that fail to support democracy and human rights, while promoting those of countries that sustain democracy and human rights. It is up to the democracies of the world to take back the United Nations. With strong and visionary leadership, these democracies can ensure the United Nations meets today's challenges.

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