The U.N. Human Rights Council Whitewashes Brutality

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The president of Venezuela, whose government shoots protesters in the street, recently thanked the international community for its “[universal vote of confidence](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16746&LangID=E)” in that country’s commitment to human rights.

The Cuban deputy foreign minister, whose government imprisons thousands of political opponents, once said Cuba has historic prestige “in the promotion and protection of all human rights.”

How can these people get away with saying such things? Because they have been elected to the [U.N. Human Rights Council](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/hr_council/hr_q_and_a.htm), whose members are — on paper — charged with “upholding the highest standards” of human rights.

Last month, [a U.S. Senate subcommittee met](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/052517) to consider whether the United States should remain a part of the council. Expert witnesses shared their viewpoints, not on the question of whether America supports human rights — of course we do, and very strongly. The question was whether the Human Rights Council actually supports human rights or is merely a showcase for dictatorships that use their membership to whitewash brutality.

When the council focuses on human rights instead of politics, it advances important causes. In North Korea, its attention has led to action on human rights abuses. In Syria, it has established a commission on the atrocities of Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

All too often, however, the victims of the world’s most egregious human rights violations are ignored by the very organization that is supposed to protect them.

Venezuela is a member of the council despite the systematic destruction of civil society by the government of Nicolás Maduro through arbitrary detention, torture and blatant violations of freedom of the press and expression. Mothers are forced to dig through trash cans to feed their children. This is a crisis that has been 18 years in the making. And yet, not once has the Human Rights Council seen fit to condemn Venezuela.

Cuba’s government strictly controls the media and severely restricts the Cuban people’s access to the Internet. Political prisoners by the thousands sit in Cuban jails. Yet Cuba has never been condemned by the council; it, too, is a member.

In 2014, [Russia invaded Ukraine](http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/28/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/) and took over Crimea. This illegal occupation resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and injuries, as well as arbitrary detentions. No special meeting of the Human Rights Council was called, and the abuses continue to mount.

The council has been given a great responsibility. It has been charged with using the moral power of universal human rights to be the world’s advocate for the most vulnerable among us. The United Nations must reclaim the legitimacy of this organization.

For all of us, this is an urgent task. Human rights are central to the mission of the United Nations. Not only are they the right thing to promote, they are also the smart thing to promote. In April, I dedicated the U.S. presidency of the U.N. Security Council to making the connection between human rights and peace and security.

Next week, I will travel to [Geneva](http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21676&LangID=E) to address the Human Rights Council about the United States’ concerns.

I will outline changes that must be made. Among other things, membership on the council must be determined through competitive voting to keep the worst human rights abusers from obtaining seats. As it stands, regional blocs nominate candidates that are uncontested. Competition would force a candidate’s human rights record to be considered before votes were cast. The council must also end its practice of wrongly singling out Israel for criticism. When the council passes more than 70 resolutions against Israel, a country with a strong human rights record, and just seven resolutions against Iran, a country with an abysmal human rights record, you know something is seriously wrong.

The presence of multiple human rights-violating countries on the Human Rights Council has damaged both the reputation of the council and the cause of human rights. When the world’s preeminent human rights body is turned into a haven for dictators, the idea of international cooperation in support of human dignity is discredited. Cynicism grows. There is already more than enough cynicism to go around these days.

I believe the vision of the Human Rights Council is still achievable, but not without change. It is the responsibility of the United Nations to reclaim this vision and to restore the legitimacy of universal human rights.