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Day to mourn, not celebrate, human rights

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This year has been another bad year for human rights, and there is little to celebrate on International Human Rights Day. Mass killings have continued in Darfur, the Congo and elsewhere in Africa, with only minor and sporadic attention from the media or the UN. Dictatorships in North Korea and Burma terrorise their citizens daily, with no end in sight. In Iran, a rigged election brought thousands of democracy protesters into the streets, where they were attacked (at least 70 people, including Neda Agha-Soltan, were reportedly killed) and arrested, followed by Stalinist show trials designed to intimidate these advocates.

Tragically, Human Rights Day, which marks the anniversary of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Conventions, now serves as a reminder of the abject failure of the international community in living up to its moral commitments. Ignoring the pleas of victims around the world, the UN Human Rights Council is locked on to a political agenda that uses the rhetoric of international law as a weapon in the political war targeting Israel. The Organisation of the Islamic Conference, which controls the UNHRCs agenda and chooses its officials, has no interest in opening a discussion of the systematic oppression of women or minorities in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Libya, Gaza, etc. Israel is a convenient diversion, which explains the obsessive focus on "war crimes" claims, including the biased mandate of the Goldstone report on the Gaza conflict.

To make matters worse, the non-governmental human rights watchdogs that were created to offset the unethical behaviour and biases of governments, have become accomplices in promoting oppression. Superpowers like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Paris-based International Federation of Human Rights and similar groups with multi-million-dollar budgets work closely with and support the agendas of the UNHRC and other international frameworks. Instead of speaking truth to this blatant abuse of power, officials of these self-proclaimed human rights groups are part of the problem, remaining largely silent while the abuses in Africa, Asia or the Arab world continue.

The past year has seen even greater co-operation between the UN and the NGOs in twisting human rights values beyond recognition. Human Rights Watch was caught attempting to raise funds from wealthy members of Saudi Arabia's elite. Instead of leading the campaign against the abuses imposed by the Wahabi religious police, this "watchdog" hosted a member of the Shura council at a dinner which featured more Israel-bashing and dark warnings of the power of "pro-Israel pressure groups". Other scandals, including the suspension of HRW's "senior military analyst", and unanswered questions about his professional qualifications, further tarnished this organisation.

In parallel, Amnesty International and the other groups have accelerated the effort to transform human rights and international law into ideological platforms used against Western democracies and open societies. Like HRW, a highly disproportionate percentage of Amnesty's reports and campaigns focus on criticising the US and NATO countries for alleged infractions in Iraq and Afghanistan, while terrorists and their state supporters get relatively little attention. This is a paternalistic and patronising distortion, which assumes that Muslims in al-Qa'ida or Afghan Taliban "militants" are exempt from human rights requirements, and are held to a lower standard.

But at the end of 2009 there are some signs of hope for the human rights community. The "halo effect" that had protected powerful groups from research and criticism has begun to break down. HRW founder Robert Bernstein published an oped in The New York Times in which he denounced his own organisation for betraying its moral principles. Although HRW officials launched a campaign to discredit Bernstein and other critics (particularly NGO Monitor), in order to restore their lost credibility, others realise the need for an entirely new and unbiased leadership, particularly in activities related to the Middle East.

On another front, the Canadian government has moved to halt the funnelling of millions of taxpayer funds to organisations that exploit the rhetoric of human rights in order to promote radical ideologies that undermine these values.

In the 1970s, radical groups that claimed to promote "social progress" and "solidarity" politics were able to obtain substantial funding from sympathetic officials in Canada and in liberal European governments. By putting an end to this inversion, the Canadians can also contribute to a return to the core moral and universal principles of human rights.

For people committed to the substance, and not only the language, of human rights, these developments suggest that a tipping point has been reached.

The absurdity of a Libyan official chairing UN human rights sessions in which Iran, Darfur and China are erased from the agenda, with the assistance of groups like Amnesty and HRW, may finally be too great to ignore.

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