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FROM THE EDITORS

Restoring Universal Human Rights at the United Nations

This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that monumental and hopeful document that extends equal dignity to every member of the human family and relies on the rule of right as the only final recourse against violence and war. Since its inception, the United Nations has kept at its heart an organ dedicated to protecting human rights.

In 2006, under mounting criticism that it had become “too selective and too political”—in the words of then-Secretary General Kofi Annan—the U.N. Commission on Human Rights was replaced by the U.N. Human Rights Council. The creation of the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was met with renewed optimism that the U.N. would again rise to the high ideals embodied in the Universal Declaration.

On Friday, March 28, 2008, a blow was struck at the very heart of the United Nations.

A new U.N. initiative would “stifle the speech of the world’s citizens when seen as necessary in order to protect particular beliefs and practices from criticism.”

On that day, the Canadian delegation moved a resolution at the UNHRC to renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Speech. Traditionally, this office has been charged with monitoring and protecting the freedom of expression, that uniquely important freedom that is a precondition for the protection of all others.

However, according to an amendment advanced by a coalition of Islamic governments and supported by China, Russia, and Cuba, the mandate of the Special Rapporteur would be changed. It would now include the responsibility “to report on instances in which the abuse of the right of freedom of expression constitutes an act of racial or religious discrimination.”

The real meaning of this language, put forward in the midst of public controversy surrounding the release of publications and films critical of radical Islam, was unmistakable: the United Nations was now to stifle the speech of the world’s citizens when seen as necessary in order to protect particular beliefs and practices from criticism. During the debate, some went so far as to suggest that if member states did not limit freedom of expression, they could face violence in their streets at the hands of Islamic extremists.

The amendment would, in the words of the Canadian delegation, “turn the mandate on its head. Instead of promoting freedom of expression the Special Rapporteur would be policing its exercise.” (This is despite the fact that there already exist at the U.N. other bodies, such as the Committee on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, charged with working against incitement to racial hatred.) Joining Canada in resisting this radical new interpretation of the Special Rapporteur’s role were the European

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Union, the United Kingdom (which spoke for the United States and Australia), India, Brazil, Bolivia, Guatemala, and Switzerland. All withdrew their support of the original resolution along with more than twenty of the original fifty-three co-sponsoring nations. Staggeringly, the amendment was adopted—with a vote of twenty-seven in favor and fifteen against with three abstentions—and the resolution passed 32 to 0 with fifteen abstentions.

At the center of the human rights system of the United Nations there now stands a blasphemy taboo. More fundamentally, the manipulation of the instruments of the Council by a minority in an attempt to silence critics of a particular belief system has negated the very idea of human rights norms with universal application to individual persons. Yet it is persons, not beliefs, which deserve protection.

It is now clear that if the ideals of the Universal Declaration are to be realized, nations and peoples committed to human rights must take it upon themselves to undo this travesty.

Therefore, we join with the many civil society organizations from around the world—including many from the Islamic states—in denouncing this unnecessary, unwise, and immoral action by the United Nations Human Rights Council. Freedom-loving people know that the noble purpose of the Council is not to close any one matter off from discussion within society but to open a space for free, public discussion of every matter in all societies.

In our judgment, the UNHRC has lost any legitimate claim to moral authority on human rights. This authority will not be regained until the United Nations enacts substantial structural reforms to the Council that would remove from decision-making power any states that demonstrate their hostility to the letter and spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

May this sixtieth anniversary commemoration be the renewal of the idea of universal human rights, not its funeral!

Paul Kurtz
Austin Dacey
Norm Allen Jr.
Hugo Estrella

Paul Kurtz is the founder of the Center for Inquiry/Transnational, the chair of the Council for Secular Humanism, and the editor in chief of FREE INQUIRY. Austin Dacey is an associate editor of FREE INQUIRY and represents CFI at the U.N. He is also the author of the book The Secular Conscience and an associate editor of FREE INQUIRY. Norm Allen Jr. is the executive director of African Americans for Humanism and an associate editor for FREE INQUIRY. He and Hugo Estrella are the codirectors of international programs for CFI.

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