



Where Autocrats Don't Fear to Tread

Why dictators love the United Nations.

BY JEFFREY HERBST | JULY/AUGUST 2010



In May 2007, Zimbabwe was elected to chair the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. It was a novel choice, as "sustainable" wasn't exactly the

first word most people would use to describe the course President Robert Mugabe has charted for his southern African nation.

Radical economic policies imposed by the revolutionary-turned-strongman had systematically destroyed Zimbabwe, plunging a once relatively prosperous country of some 12 million people into destitution. Farm productivity had fallen three-quarters for some crops; the U.N. World Food Program found that 3.3 million people were at risk of hunger, and nearly as many had fled to find work and refuge elsewhere. There was also the inconvenient fact that Mugabe's environment and tourism minister, Francis Nhema, who would represent Zimbabwe on the commission, was banned from traveling to the European Union on account of EU sanctions. But the Zimbabweans had firm African support, so there was little that other U.N. members could do but look on in horror.

The U.N.'s relationship with autocracy has always been fraught, but the organization has only grown more schizophrenic toward repressive rulers like Mugabe since the fall of the Berlin Wall, becoming more openly pro-democracy even as it has remained at times astonishingly accommodating of dictators. It's true that the U.N.'s commendable corps of experts has provided important technical assistance for elections in dozens of developing countries taking halting steps toward democracy in recent years. And occasional furors do erupt over the more egregious cases of U.N. dictator-coddling, as when Libya -- and other less notorious but repressive countries such as Angola, Mauritania, and Qatar -- **joined the Human Rights Council**, or when UNESCO decided to **name a scientific prize** after Equatorial Guinea's kleptocratic leader. But most of the U.N. system remains a safe haven, offering an imprimatur of legitimacy that dictators often can't find elsewhere.

It's a safe haven that has existed from the U.N.'s earliest days. In his 1946 address to the General Assembly's first session, U.S. President Harry Truman spoke eloquently of the four freedoms -- freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want,

and freedom from fear -- enshrined in the U.N. Charter. But democracy was never on the list. Forged in the aftermath of World War II and counting the Soviet Union among its founding members, the organization's primary aim was to resolve conflicts, not meddle in countries' internal affairs. And though Truman spoke of the need for justice for all in his address, he was also quite clear that judgments were not to be made about the relative advantages of one sort of government. "To permit the United Nations to be broken into irreconcilable parts by different political philosophies," **he said**, "would bring disaster."

The U.N. also welcomed decolonization in the developing world -- any country that won independence from its former masters was automatically considered sovereign and invited to join. In this, it was remarkably successful. The wave of decolonization that swept through Asia and Africa in the 1950s and 1960s was the largest transfer of power in human history and a surprisingly peaceful one, all things considered -- the European colonizers, particularly Britain and France, were simply exhausted after World War II, and the United States was happy to have its new tool of international statecraft supervise the dismantling of Old World empires.

But for the new countries, U.N. membership came with surprisingly few strings attached. Whether the fledgling nation actually ruled its own territory, could defend itself, or had a government supported by the people it governed had no bearing on its legitimacy in the organization's eyes. And per Truman's early caution, no questions were asked when the nominal democracies in many Asian and African countries at the dawn of independence broke down. As the developing world increasingly came under the rule of military juntas, one-party systems, and other forms of authoritarianism, the U.N. accordingly became a place dictators were welcomed and outrageous abuses were ignored. No matter how loathed by their people, ghastly rulers like Uganda's Idi Amin could make use of the U.N. platform and continue to participate in U.N. activities even as they oversaw massive violations of human rights.

Decades later, the organization has not done much better in combating the pathologies of dictatorship within such countries. Look at Darfur, where the U.N. leadership decried widespread killing, but then stood by and watched. When he was U.N. secretary-general, Kofi **Annan echoed** another **Truman speech**: "[A]s Truman said, 'If we should pay merely lip service to inspiring ideals, and later do violence to simple justice, we would draw down upon us the bitter wrath of generations yet unborn.' And when I look at the murder, rape, and starvation to which the people of Darfur are being subjected, I fear that we have not got far beyond 'lip service.'" (Tellingly, however, Annan blamed this failure on the big powers, rather than the U.N. itself.)

The U.N.'s inability to grow beyond a kind of trade union movement for states is poignantly demonstrated by its actions in southern Africa. In a rare moment of moral clarity, the U.N. pushed hard to end South Africa's apartheid system during the 1970s and 1980s. But today, the same generation of South African leaders who fought minority-white rule has quickly fallen into step with standard U.N. practices, blocking efforts to isolate odious regimes in Burma and Zimbabwe (the U.N. should stick to resolving international conflicts and not "bully" small countries about human rights, South Africa's man in Turtle Bay declared).

This failure is particularly damaging today in light of the fundamental change in the nature of conflict that has occurred since the U.N.'s founding. Internal conflict and poor governance, often fueled by the actions of dictators, are today a much greater risk to the developing world's people than the more traditional wars between states that defined world politics in 1945. The U.N. was built to stop such disputes, and their rarity today is in part a measure of the organization's success. But now, an international organization that was designed to address the conflicts of the mid-20th century finds itself poorly prepared for those of the early 21st. Getting rulers to play well with each other requires a different institutional skill set than getting them to behave better within their own borders.

Is the U.N. to blame for the persistence of dictators? In the end, the answer must be "no," if only because the U.N. does not have that much clout. Dictators come to power because of complex and powerful domestic forces, and that often gives them the ability to resist significant international pressure, much less the moral suasion and limited sanctions that the U.N. can propose.

Of course the U.N. could do more. But that would require an effort on the part of the great powers that, as Annan correctly implies, they haven't exactly been interested in. Unless they change their ways, both the U.N. and the dictators it gives aid and comfort to will look increasingly like relics of a bygone era.

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