

Fresh paint over the same old cracks – Empty promises as candidates line up for the Human Rights Council

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Maja Daruwala, Director of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, has called for careful scrutiny of candidates that are standing for election to the United Nation's new Human Rights Council next week. "The Human Rights Council heralds an exciting new era for the protection of human rights throughout the world," Ms Daruwala said. "The election of its members will set the Council's course for many years to come. There are countries standing for election that do not protect human rights within their own borders – how can we expect them to police human rights internationally?"

The Human Rights Council is a new body that replaces the now-defunct Human Rights Commission. The Human Rights Commission sat for the last time earlier this year, beset by charges of ineffectiveness, inaction and hypocrisy. In particular, there was an increasing clamour of voices calling into question the human rights records of the countries sitting on the Commission. The Human Rights Council, which sits for the first time on 19 June 2006, has been set up in response to the problems that disabled the Commission.

The UN General Assembly will elect members to the Council on 9 May 2006. A number of countries have already announced that they will stand for election to the Council – so far, 13 Commonwealth countries, including Bangladesh, Cameroon, Canada, India, Kenya, Ghana, Malaysia, Mauritius, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the UK and Zambia, have put up their hand. "The elections are crucial to the future effectiveness of the Council," noted Ms Daruwala. "The old Commission was criticised for a membership that failed to keep their own houses in order – that mistake must not be made again. Without members that are human rights champions, the new Council will fail to realise the hopes of millions around the globe."

"The first thing we should do is have a look at how many of the Council candidates keep their promises to make regular reports to treaty-monitoring bodies," said Ms Daruwala. "Concerningly, some countries fail to make even this initial hurdle." The facts speak for themselves. Mauritius has 9 reports outstanding – some due since 1993. Pakistan has 5 reports overdue, and has never submitted a report under the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discriminations Against Women – the first report was due in 1997. Kenya owes 9 reports – in 2004, it submitted a report to the Human Rights Committee 18 years late.

The pledges submitted by the Council candidates also make interesting reading. Ms Daruwala said, "In its pledge, Bangladesh claims to be at the forefront of the promotion and protection of human rights nationally, regionally and internationally. This is not the case. Torture is routine for its security forces, minorities are seriously discriminated against and there have been a number of extra-judicial executions. Bangladesh has one of the worst records in the world for attacking the media and freedom of expression. And after ten years of work and considerable donor support, we still haven't seen the National Human Rights Institution open its doors."

"Cameroon has a long history of human rights violations," Ms Daruwala continued, "Over the years, there have been countless examples of human rights defenders being detained or harassed and assaulted, freedom of expression is marginal and political prisoners litter the country's prisons." Cameroon's pledge uses its National Commission on Human Rights Freedoms (NCHRF) to showcase its commitment to human rights. What its pledge fails to say, however, is that the NCHRF does not abide by the internationally agreed basic standards for human rights institutions found in the Paris Principles, or that the President has control over appointments to and operation of the NCHRF – and hasn't appointed any members for many years.

"Next Tuesday, as it sits to elect members to the Human Right Council, the UN General Assembly takes a critical step towards a true global commitment to protecting and policing human rights," finished Ms Daruwala. "The General Assembly must remember that the Human Rights Council will be the sum of its parts, and must not be composed of countries with poor human rights records. To elect human rights violators will be to squander this unique opportunity to make a real difference to the protection of human rights all over the world."

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The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-partisan, international NGO working for the practical realisation of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth.