**Who Put Iran in Charge of Women's Rights?**

The country's election to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women is a joke.

By Anne Applebaum

May 3, 2010

Slate

Original Source: *http://www.slate.com/id/2252718/*

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad campaigned in Uganda and Zimbabwe. Behind the scenes, his flunkies twisted arms and offered favors. For weeks, feelers were sent out to all kinds of unlikely allies. What was the diplomatic prize at stake? Nothing less than a seat on the U.N. council on human rights.

All this was perfectly appropriate. Despite its title, this is a committee whose past members—Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Zimbabwe among them—have not been renowned for their adherence to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. On the contrary, authoritarian regimes have long battled to join the council and its predecessor organizations, the better to prevent any outsiders from investigating their own governments. Once they became members, much of their time was spent denouncing Israel and the United States, while studiously avoiding anything that might sound, say, like criticism of Russian behavior in Chechnya.

Different U.S. administrations have adopted different approaches to this peculiar institution. In recent years, the United States has quit the council, denounced the council, and isolated the council, generally with bipartisan support. Perhaps the only New York Times editorial ever written in praise of John Bolton, President George W. Bush's pugnacious U.N. ambassador, complimented him for advocating its radical reform.

Yet the council kept working to the advantage of its members. The fact is that in places like Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Zimbabwe, praise—or even lack of condemnation—from something called the "U.N. Human Rights Council" still carries a good deal of political weight. We might roll our eyes when a committee headed by Libya solemnly pats China on the back for its good behavior in Tibet, but inside China this makes useful propaganda. We might not take seriously the umpteenth denunciation of Israel by yet another U.N. body, but the Syrian government probably finds it helpful.

Knowing this to be the case, the Obama administration, while it was pressing its other reset buttons, decided to rejoin the council in 2009, the better to "reform the institution from within." This was not just a gesture of friendship to the human rights council; this was an olive branch for the United Nations itself: We were going to engage with the process, work with others, use diplomacy. We were going to change the way the committee operated, make the United Nations work for democratic values and not against them.

And we did. When Iran began to campaign for membership, Western diplomats—French, Swiss, and others, as well as American—took this prospect seriously for the first time in recent memory. They, too, began twisting arms and offering favors. They, too, sent their ambassadors to bat. Western human rights groups planned major events around the council meeting. Two French human rights activists made a film about the whole affair. Other experts mobilized their evidence: The wave of arrests and killings that followed last June's disputed Iranian election, the women who are severely beaten for not covering their bodies, the wider discrimination against both women and religious minorities in courts of law, the ubiquitous presence of police thugs and informers on the streets.

It worked. Fearing it would lose, or fearing bad publicity that might get beamed back into the country, Iran withdrew its application on April 23. The human rights groups claimed "victory." American officials spoke loftily of a "step in the right direction."

And the result? Five days later, on April 28, another committee, the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women—a body dedicated to "gender equality and the advancement of women"—put out a turgid press release announcing its new members. Among them will be … the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Which is fine, unless you think that the "advancement of women" should not include the stoning of women for alleged adultery. And unless you think, as I do, that it is time to abandon the fiction of U.N. human rights diplomacy altogether—or if you worry, as perhaps we all ought to, that Iran knows its way around U.N. nuclear diplomacy better than we imagine.