A Good Day For Autocrats as UN Body Hands Out Leadership Posts

April 17, 2018

By [Patrick Goodenough](https://www.cnsnews.com/author/patrick-goodenough)

CNS News

<https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/good-day-autocracies-un-body-hands-out-leadership-posts>

In a busy day at the United Nations, diplomats in New York on Monday filled dozens of leadership positions across a range of U.N. bodies, with many going – in some case without even a semblance of a vote – to some of the world’s most repressive regimes.

In one of the more striking decisions taken by the U.N. Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Saudi Arabia was handed a seat on the executive board of the women’s empowerment agency U.N. Women for the three-year period 2019-2021.

Meanwhile, ECOSOC decided that the influential 19-seat committee empowered to accredit non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will for the 2019-2022 period include seven countries with poor human rights records – Cuba, Russia, China, Sudan, Bahrain, Libya and Burundi.

The regime that rules Iran was given several leadership posts, including a seat on the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and the executive board of the World Food Program.

The Castro regime in Cuba, apart from its seat on the NGO Committee, was handed posts on the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, U.N. Women, and another body focused on gender equality, the Commission on the Status of Women.

In the vast majority of cases, ECOSOC took the decisions “by acclamation,” which means there was no actual vote, and no country raised an objection and called for one.

All of these countries are currently graded “not free” by the Washington-based democracy watchdog Freedom House, which every year evaluates countries’ records on political rights and civil liberties.

Other “not free” countries to be handed various leadership posts on Monday included Russia, China, Zimbabwe, Bahrain, Iraq, Mauritania, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea and Equatorial Guinea.

American taxpayers account for 22 percent of the regular budget of the U.N., which includes its major organs like ECOSOC.

Saudi Arabia’s elevation to a seat on the 41-member U.N. Women executive board comes even as the Sunni kingdom remains in the seventh-lowest position (138th out of 144 countries) in the World Economic Forum’s latest annual gender equality index.

Yemen, Pakistan and Iran, which are even further down the WEF index this year (in 144th, 143rd and 140th place respectively) are already member of the U.N. Women board.

The WEF [Global Gender Gap](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2017.pdf) report measures gaps between women and men in the fields of political empowerment, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and health and survival.

This isn’t the first time in recent years that Saudi Arabia has assumed a leadership post on a U.N. body dealing with women’s issues, having served on U.N. Women from 2011-2013 and from 2014-2016.

One year ago, Saudi Arabia was elected onto the Commission on the Status of Women – in an ECOSOC vote that drew scrutiny when it became clear that [even some Western democracies supported its candidacy](http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/unnamed-democracies-voted-saudi-arabia-uns-top-gender-equality-body), under cover of a secret ballot vote.

Monday’s decisions relating to the NGO Committee are also controversial. For years the committee has come under fire for rejecting accreditation applications by NGOs whose work has unsettled repressive regimes by shining a light on their human rights records.

Most recently, the NGO Committee [voted in February to reject applications](https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/haley-un-committee-being-steamrolled-countries-terrible-human-rights) by the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (by a 9-4 vote) and the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (by a 9-5 vote).

U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley at the time called decisions “shameful,” saying the committee was “being steamrolled by countries with terrible human rights records themselves.”

“Consultative status” at the U.N. is important for NGOs since it enables them to take part in sessions of various U.N. organs, such as the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The rejected NGOs are hoping that a full meeting of ECOSOC – scheduled for Tuesday – overturns the NGO Committee’s February decision.

Whatever the case, with Monday’s “by acclamation” bestowal of seats on the NGO Committee to seven “not free” countries for the next four years, controversial decisions are unlikely to be a thing of the past.

“Membership on this committee matters,” U.N. Watch executive director Hillel Neuer said on Monday, “because it’s the first gatekeeper for deciding which human rights activists and civil society groups can have a place and a voice at the United Nations.”

“Sadly, the dictator-dominated committee systematically denies accreditation to legitimate organizations, and harasses those who already have NGO status in order to intimidate them into silence.”