

The African Union Gets It Half-Right

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Editorial

The African Union did the right thing in rejecting Sudan's bid for the rotating presidency of the organization. Allowing President Omar Hassan al-Bashir of Sudan to become Africa's face to the world would have sent just about every wrong message imaginable. Mr. Bashir has presided over the genocide perpetrated by Sudanese soldiers and allied militias in Darfur since 2003. He's not exactly the person anyone would want in nominal command of the 7,000-strong African Union force that is trying to protect civilians in Darfur. His ascension would have mocked the group's declared goal of promoting democracy, human rights and development.

The only question is why the African leaders in Khartoum for the sixth African Union summit meeting even wasted so much time on the issue, given the really pressing problems on their agenda. While the African Union usually passes the presidency on to the host of its regular summit meeting, the main purpose in founding the organization in 2002 was to avoid the pitfalls of its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity, which came to be derisively known as a dictators' club because of its consistent failure to sanction any member. The African Union, loosely modeled on the European Union, was meant to confront the continent's failings and problems head-on, and to find African solutions for them. So accepting Mr. Bashir's bid for the presidency would have been a serious blow to the union's credibility.

Unfortunately, that credibility is still on probation. Though rebuffed for now, Mr. Bashir was promised the group's presidency in 2007, and for now the chair will go to the Congo Republic, hardly a model of human rights. Giving Sudan the African Union presidency next year will be just as unacceptable as it was this year.