

## **Venezuela, the bane of human rights**

**By Editorial Board, The Washington Post**

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ON MONDAY, new members will be selected for the United Nations Human Rights Council, the top-level group for the protection and promotion of human rights. Its members have not always been paragons of respect for human dignity. Those leaving the 47-member council at the end of this year include China, Cuba and Russia. But up for a seat this time is a truly unqualified candidate, Venezuela. Its strongman president, Hugo Chávez, has brazenly trampled human rights in his quest for power and political control.

A new member must get at least a majority, or 97 votes, from the General Assembly, and while the assembly could prevent Venezuela from joining, it probably won't. Since the council was created in 2006, the assembly has never voted down a candidate, according to Freedom House. Some candidates, such as Sudan, have dropped their bids in the face of opposition. But the assembly selected Moammar Gaddafi's Libya.

In choosing members, according to the founding resolution for the council, the General Assembly is supposed to "take into account the contribution of candidates to the promotion and protection of human rights and their voluntary pledges and commitments" to do so. Moreover, the "members elected to the council shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights."

Venezuela under Mr. Chávez has no place at this table. According to Human Rights Watch, the judiciary has largely ceased to function as an independent branch of government. A human rights travesty has been evident in the case of Judge Maria Lourdes Afiuni. In 2009, she angered Mr. Chávez with a ruling that gave conditional release to a businessman who was a prominent critic of the president. The businessman had been awaiting trial for almost three years. Soon after her ruling, the judge was arrested, and Mr. Chávez denounced her as a "bandit" on national television. She was held for more than a year in a two-by-four-meter cell in a Caracas prison that included 20 women she had sentenced as a judge. They confronted her with death threats. After she underwent surgery for cancer in 2011, she was released to house arrest but under onerous terms, including that she not be allowed to step outside for exposure to the sun.

Mr. Chávez has an equally poor record on freedom of expression. He has bullied and punished the news media for critical reporting on the government's handling of such things as water pollution, violent crime, a prison riot and an earthquake.

In its bid to become a member, Venezuela offered pledges to respect human rights, including to take action "to protect freedom of expression and opinion." But the words are hollow. By deeds, Mr. Chávez has shown what he stands for, and it is not the protection of human rights. In 2009 the Obama administration announced plans to join the Human Rights Council and engage from the inside rather than criticize from without. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton declared last year, "Membership on this council should be earned through respect for human rights." By that standard, Mr. Chávez should not be allowed in the door.

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