

RIGHTS GROUP SAYS WEST BACKS 'SHAM' DEMOCRACIES

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By Olivia Ward, Toronto Star, Feb 01, 2008

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Western fear of militant Islam and a rush for energy supplies and commercial gain have allowed a number of dictators to get away with a pretense of democracy and undercut moderate political parties at the expense of extremists.

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In Zimbabwe, opposition supporters are beaten and detained by police.

In Egypt, publishing "anti-government" reports lands journalists and bloggers in jail.

In Pakistan, opponents of President Pervez Musharraf have been forced to live under house arrest.

Yet, says Human Rights Watch, autocratic rulers are gaining international brownie points by paying lip service to democracy, while holding rigged or manipulated elections.

In its 2008 annual report released yesterday, the U.S.-based organization criticizes Western governments for devaluing democracy by allowing "dictators to legitimize themselves on the cheap." "It's too easy for autocrats to get away with mounting a sham democracy," said Kenneth Roth, the group's executive director.

"Too many Western governments insist on elections and leave it at that. They don't press governments on the key human rights issues that make democracy function – a free press, peaceful assembly and a functioning civil society that can really challenge power."

Countries like Jordan, Russia, Ethiopia and Nigeria escape major international censure because they are key political or economic players, Roth said.

Western fear of militant Islam and a rush for energy supplies and commercial gain have allowed a number of dictators to get away with a pretense of democracy and undercut moderate political parties at the expense of extremists, he added.

"A more sophisticated response is needed, one that would push autocrats to allow a range of political choices before rushing to elections."

Roth urged the West to "press to transform the political landscape so that voters will face a meaningful range of political options before marking their ballot," arguing that "genuine choice tends to be the enemy of extremism." Manipulating elections is done in a wide variety of ways, the report said, accusing Chad, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Nigeria and Uzbekistan of "outright fraud" in rigging the polls. And, it said, "control of electoral machinery" to thwart opposition candidates was practiced in Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Malaysia, Thailand and Zimbabwe.

Blocking or discouraging opposition candidates was reported in Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Israel (in the Palestinian territories),

Libya, Turkmenistan and Uganda.

Violence against opposition and political figures was used in Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Lebanon.

The rule of law was undermined in China. And In Russia and Tunisia, the media and civil society were stifled. But, said Roth: "It's a sign of hope that even dictators have come to believe that the route to legitimacy runs by way of democratic credentials."

In its survey of more than 75 countries, Human Rights Watch also pointed to grave human rights abuses around the globe.

The humanitarian crisis in Somalia and eastern Ethiopia's mainly Somali Ogaden region is worsening and affects millions of civilians.

In spite of a media spotlight on the Horn of Africa, it remains "a forgotten tragedy."

The group said that Sudan's government "bears principal responsibility" for the five-year crisis of Darfur, where 2.4 million people are displaced, and 4 million living on humanitarian aid.

In Burma, the military government used deadly force against hundreds of people, and hundreds of others are still arbitrarily detained after last September's protests.

Heavy fighting between Sri Lanka's government forces and the Tamil Tigers have led to "deliberate and indiscriminate attacks on civilians," the report said. More than 20,000 people have been displaced.

But Human Rights Watch also had harsh words for Washington, which it said allowed 275 detainees of the "so-called war on terror" to be held without charge at Guantanamo Bay. Some have been cleared for release, but cannot be sent home, and no country will take them.

