



Democracies turn blind eye to abuse, rights group says

Many elections are just shams, the report says.

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WASHINGTON - Authoritarian rulers are violating human rights around the world and getting away with it largely because the United States and European and other established democracies accept their claims that merely holding elections makes them democratic, Human Rights Watch said Thursday.

By failing to demand that offenders honor their citizens' civil and political rights and other requirements of true democracy, Western democracies risk undermining human rights everywhere, the international rights watchdog said in its annual review.

Still, Kenneth Roth, Human Rights Watch's executive director, wrote in a segment of the report called "Despots Masquerading as Democrats": "It is a sign of hope that even dictators have come to believe that the route to legitimacy runs by way of democratic credentials."

Among countries named as major violators of their democratic credentials in 2007 were Kenya, Pakistan, Bahrain, Jordan, Nigeria, Russia and Thailand. The report covered the year through November. In December, Thailand's military government allowed elections and was voted out of power by a large majority to end 16 months of rule by the junta.

The annual report is the 18th compiled by Human Rights Watch. It summarizes human rights shortcomings in more than 75 countries.

Among other countries listed as abusers were Chad, Colombia, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam. It spoke of abuses by the United States, France and Britain, along with Pakistan, in the name of a "war on terror."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and other European leaders were criticized for their reluctance to allow Turkey to join the European Union, despite its improved human rights record.

The report said the EU "lost leverage itself and diminished the clout of those in Turkey who have cited the prospect of EU membership as a reason for reform."

The report's emphasis, however, was the false democracies and the countries that enable them.

"It's now too easy for autocrats to get away with mounting a sham democracy," Roth said in a statement. "That's because too many Western governments insist on elections and leave it at that."

Ignored are "the key human rights issues that make democracy function: a free press, peaceful assembly and a functioning civil society that can really challenge power," he said.

The report said elections were manipulated in a number of ways, including:

- Fraud: Chad, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Uzbekistan.
- Control of electoral machinery: Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Malaysia, Thailand, Zimbabwe.
- Interfering with opposition candidates: Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories, Libya, Turkmenistan, Uganda.
- Political violence: Cambodia, Congo, Ethiopia, Lebanon.
- Stifling the media and civil society: Russia, Tunisia.
- Undermining the law: China, Pakistan.

Both domestic and international law forbid most of these tactics, Human Rights Watch said.

In the face of this, Human Rights Watch said, "The United States and the European Union should ... demand they uphold rights guaranteed by international law, including a free media, freedom of assembly and a secret ballot."

"It seems Washington and European governments will accept even the most dubious election so long as the 'victor' is a strategic or commercial ally," Roth said.

U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said Thursday that he had not read the report. But promoting human rights, he said, is the "core" of U.S. foreign policy.

The United States, he said, encourages the deepening of democracy "in countries where it already exists; and where it has not taken root, (we) work hard in terms of dialogue with those governments and application of resources to see that it does take root."

"It's a long process," he added. "It's the work of generations."