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The Shame of the United Nations

Editorial
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When it comes to reforming the disgraceful United Nations Human Rights Commission, America's ambassador, John Bolton, is right; Secretary General Kofi Annan is wrong; and leading international human rights groups have unwisely put their preference for multilateral consensus ahead of their duty to fight for the strongest possible human rights protection. A once-promising reform proposal has been so watered down that it has become an ugly sham, offering cover to an unacceptable status quo. It should be renegotiated or rejected.

Some of the world's most abusive regimes have won seats on the Human Rights Commission and used them to insulate themselves from criticism. Current members include Sudan, which is carrying out genocide; Nepal, whose absolute monarch has suspended basic liberties; and Saudi Arabia, where women have few rights. All are gross violators of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the commission's founding document.

Ideally, violators of the declaration should be barred from the new Human Rights Council, which would succeed the commission. Mr. Annan's original proposal did not go that far. But it significantly raised the bar by requiring a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly to win a seat. This essential change has been eliminated and replaced by a technical adjustment barely visible to the naked eye. States will still be nominated by regional blocs without regard to human rights performance. A few other incremental improvements are not enough to redeem this pathetic draft. Approving it, as groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International wrongly urge, would take off the heat for meaningful change.

Mr. Bolton, representing an administration whose record is stained by Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, is awkwardly placed to defend basic human rights principles. But he also represents the United States, with its long and proud human rights tradition. We hope that his refusal to go along with this shameful charade can produce something better.