

Amnesty International Report 2012

Opinion piece

AI Index: POL 10/005/2012
May 2012

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We are living in remarkable times for human rights. In a year when protestors have shown us what true bravery can be, change has become far more possible than many would have thought possible not so very long ago.

But just as the protestors have taught us the meaning of courage in the face of adversity, the toxic mix of power politics and the global arms trade have shown us how leadership can fail to live up to their example. Rather than seize the opportunity presented by the uprisings that have ousted dictators or left them fighting rearguard actions for survival, powerful states have shown that they cannot be trusted to put human life and dignity before profit.

Governments have reacted to real or potential protest by trying to slide back to tired and ultimately self-defeating default settings of repression in a bid to maintain power, or hypocrisy in a bid to maintain the status quo regarding strategically useful allies.

In the Middle East and North Africa, where the human rights context has been transformed by mass demands for change, the response to protest by governments has mostly been driven by the same established patterns of abuse. Thousands have been unlawfully killed by state forces trying to crush uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and beyond.

As global powers jockeyed for influence in the region, human rights became relegated to mere rhetoric, with opportunistic alliances and financial interests taking centre stage. Early vocal support for the protest movements has either ebbed away or has not been transformed into action.

The United Nations Security Council – through its own political game playing, backsliding and placement of profit over principle – has once again been left looking suspect as a guardian of global peace and security.

In mitigation, some might point to the Security Council's unprecedented referral of Libya to the International Criminal Court. Yes, this was a positive step and one that sent a strong signal about the importance of accountability. But justice cannot be selective. The Security Council has shown no appetite to address evidence of crimes against humanity in Syria in a similar manner.

In fact, rather than acting to protect the Syrian people by insisting on consistent application of international justice, the Security Council betrayed them through silence. Russia and China, citing outdated and outmoded principles of state sovereignty, blocked two relatively weak resolutions on Syria that would have demanded that the Syrian government cease its campaign of violence.

As the big powers played politics and profit, the Syrian military used tanks to shell the city of Homs. As the powerful chose silence in place of action, the UN Secretary-General's Special

Representative for Children and Armed Conflict reported that hundreds of children had been killed, and children as young as 10 years old arrested, detained and tortured.

It took intense international pressure and months of bloodshed and political wrangling before the Security Council finally agreed resolutions aimed at deploying monitors in Syria to try to stop the violations.

The failure over Syria followed hard on the heels of its failure to intervene in the case of Sri Lanka, and was accompanied by failure to speak out against serious abuses by the Sudanese government, including indiscriminate aerial bombardments by the Sudanese Armed Forces in Southern Kordofan following South Sudan's independence.

Russia has made no secret of its continued arms supplies to Syria throughout the brutal crackdown. But serious questions are posed by the fact that Syria is one of Russia's main customers for arms. In the years leading to the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, Western governments, including the USA and Russia, failed to prevent arms exports that contributed to abuses in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen.

Ultimately, how can the UN Security Council be trusted to protect people's rights when its permanent members are also the world's biggest arms traders, and enjoy an absolute veto on any council resolution? Can the flow of 74 per cent of the world's weapons from China, France, Russia, the UK and USA really be ignored as a major obstacle to peace and security?

In July, UN member states meet to agree a final text of an Arms Trade Treaty. Governments will have an opportunity to show that they have the political will and courage to place people's lives and rights above profit and politics.

A strong treaty will prevent the international transfer of all types of conventional arms, including small arms, light weapons, ammunition and key components, to countries where there is a significant risk that they will be used to commit serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

Until and unless there is a strong Arms Trade Treaty, the UN Security Council's role as guardian of global peace and security is doomed to failure, with continuing tragic and lethal consequences for countless people. But as we have seen, change is possible. Governments now need to match the courage and conviction shown by so many protestors, and stand up for a better world.

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