



Strengthening the participation and representation of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) at the Human Rights Council



Date and time: Wednesday 20 June 2018; 13h30 – 15h00

Location: Room V, *Palais des Nations*

Sponsors: Permanent Mission of the Republic of Fiji; Permanent Mission of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas; and the Universal Rights Group.

Background:

General Assembly resolution 60/251 stipulates that membership to the Human rights Council shall be based on equitable geographical distribution and shall be open to all States Members of the United Nations. The Resolution further stipulates that when electing members of the Human Rights Council, States shall take into account the contribution of candidates to the promotion and protection of human rights and their voluntary pledges and commitments made thereto.



In short, when establishing the Council, UN Member States decided that membership should be diverse and inclusive – all States, irrespective of size, wealth or geographic location, should have the opportunity to stand for and be elected to the UN’s foremost human rights body. Furthermore, candidates for election to the Council should be objectively and transparently judged on their actual and potential contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights.

However, to-date, around 90 UN Member States have never been a member of the Council, and many of those have never even stood for election. Of the more than 50 Small Island Developing States that are members of the UN, only 2 (the Maldives and Mauritius) have ever held a seat on the Council. This means that only around 5% of all SIDS have been represented on the Council. Two others - Timor Leste in 2008, and Bahamas in 2015 – have stood but were not elected.

This lack of participation and representation undermines the inclusivity, diversity and legitimacy of the Council, and means that the unique strengths and perspectives of SIDS are not fully utilized by the UN human rights system. It is sometimes said that SIDS lack the necessary capacity to be effective members of the Council, and yet the experience of Maldives and Mauritius, as well as many other Small States (including many LDCs), tells us the opposite – that SIDS and Small States generally can be and often are highly committed and effective members of the Council.

This year, two SIDS, one from the Caribbean – the Commonwealth of The Bahamas - and one from the Pacific – the Republic of Fiji - will stand for election to the Council for the term 2019-2021. The occasion offers a good opportunity to reflect on the particular strengths and characteristics of SIDS, and the benefits they can bring to the consideration of, and action on, human rights issues at international level. It also offers a useful opportunity to reflect on why so few SIDS have stood for and been elected to the Council, and what the international community might do to change the situation. Finally, it offers a chance for the two candidates to present their visions, their pledges and their commitments to other States and to civil society, to explain how they hope to make a difference at the Council, and to engage in an open and constructive dialogue on their candidacies with all interested stakeholders.

Objective:

This side event will provide States and Non-State actors the opportunity to raise issues and have an open discussion with two Small Island Developing State candidates to the Human Rights Council on: issues of diversity and inclusivity in the membership of the Council; opportunities and challenges regarding greater SIDS (and LDC) representation at the Council, including as Members; the contribution of the Bahamas and Fiji to the promotion and protection of human rights, and their voluntary pledges and commitments made thereto; the priorities of Fiji and Bahamas if elected.



The Council elections will take place in October 2018 at the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

Format:

The event will take the form of a moderated panel discussion followed by an interactive dialogue. Light refreshments will be offered.

Moderator: Dr Justin Pettit, Human Rights Officer, Commonwealth Secretariat

Panelists:

- H.E. Ms Nazhat Shameem Khan, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Fiji
- H.E. Ms Sharon Brennen-Haylock, Ambassador, Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Commonwealth of The Bahamas
- Ms. Alicia Gibson, Assistant Counsel, Office of the Attorney-General, the Commonwealth of The Bahamas
- Mr Ashwin Raj, Director, Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission
- Mr Marc Limon, Executive Director, Universal Rights Group
- Mr Eric Tistounet, Chief of the Human Rights Council Branch, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights