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A classical realist and a neoliberal analysis of 2019 elections in the UN Human Rights Council

Abstract:

The UN Human Rights Council has 47 members who are elected by the 193 countries that belong to the General Assembly. Countries are divided into regions: Africa, Asia Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean; and Western Europe. In the Latin American case, the region has eight positions. On October 17, Venezuela has been elected, with 105 votes, by the UN General Assembly to be one of the 47 countries that integrate its Human Rights Council. The classical realist scholars would interpret those results as a way of balancing power and gaining control over a determinate matter. But the neoliberalists would say that those results were a demonstration that reciprocity and cooperation between states is possible.

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Introduction

The UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251, which created the Human Rights Council, urges Member States to elect potential council members to take into account the contribution of candidates to the promotion and protection of human rights. However, when Venezuela was elected, with 105 votes, by the UN General Assembly to be one of the 47 countries that integrate its Human Rights Council, many scholars and country representatives expressed their indignation about these results.

This paper sets out to provide an analysis of the recent actions of countries, when it comes to human rights, from a classical realism and a neoliberal perspective, as well as to explain on a domestic level the motivations behind Costa Rica, NAM, and U.S interests.

This essay will first explain the conflict using neoliberal theories, supported by the concept of reciprocity and cooperation among the states. Second, this essay will explain the conflict using classical realist theories, supported by the notion of balancing power in internal and external concepts, such as Costa Rica's case as well as the self-interest involving the United States in these elections. Finally, this essay will argue that neoliberal theories offer the best explanation for the resulting circumstances of the elections in the UN Human Rights Council.

Theoretical Approaches

a) Realism:

Realism assumes that politics obey objective laws of human nature. How these laws work has nothing to do with us. These laws are seen in the nature of humans. The main element to consider is the concept of interest defined in terms of power. Drezner (2011) establishes: "There are many varieties of realism, but all realists start with a common assumption -that anarchy is the overarching constraint of world politics" (p. 33).

This realist's perspective determines that politics is an autonomous sphere. Statesmen act based on an interest, which translates into power. It makes no sense to pay attention to ideological motivations or preferences.

The image of the world that supports the realistic paradigm has been graphically defined as the image of "billiard balls," in reference to the unitary (impenetrable) and constant conflict with states. This image rejects any idea of community and, instead, suggests anarchy and dominance as the main principles of this theory. According to Barbé (1995), "Esta definición nos remite a otros tantos términos equivalentes: estado de naturaleza, dilema de seguridad o "tercera imagen" (p. 62).¹ In fact, realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation to universal moral precepts. There is no nation that can impose its morale on the rest of the world. According to Snyder (2004), "Realism focuses on the shifting distribution of power among states" (p. 53).

For this research, it's necessary to focus in just one notion of realism, which is (neo) classical realism, as outlined by Morgenthau, Carr, in the international relations

¹ Translation: This definition refers to many other equivalent terms: state of nature, security dilemma or "third image."

diplomacy, statecraft, power matters. For this theory balancing power is prescription, states must look toward the stability of the system, and causes of state behavior are the rational pursuit of self-interest. Classical realism determines that interest is universal, but its meaning may change. The interest is the essence of politics, beyond time and place. However, the kind of Interest depends on the political and cultural context. There are different goals, but there is always an interest.

(Neo) classical realism explains that the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), supported Venezuela in the elections for the UN Human Rights Council in order to have more power and control over any actions that activists can do to protect human rights but that could attempt actions against their sovereignty. Also, realists would argue that Costa Rica nominated itself for the elections, because they wanted to increase its international prestige and also be seems as allies of the United States, supporting the pressure policy of the United States on Venezuela by denying it a position of power and control in an international organization.

The United States established that they disagree with the election's results. Realists would argue that the United States has this pressure policy on Venezuela because it's not convenient for them having China's and Russia's influence in the region. Also, realists would use the strategic natural resources within Venezuela to explain the position of the U.S in this matter as a security dilemma problem. It's all about power position, and it has nothing to do with ideals.

b) Liberalism:

Liberalism has theoretical approaches that draw mostly on the reciprocity or identity principles, and just like realism, there are many types of liberalism. According to Drezner (2011), "All liberals nevertheless share a common belief: cooperation is still possible in a world of anarchy" (p. 47).

For this research, it's necessary to focus on one assumption of liberalism, which is neoliberalism. This theory concedes several important realist assumptions, such as states are unitary and rational, but they don't follow realists' pessimistic conclusions. They argue that it is rational to seek long-term mutual gains rather than short-term individual interests, because prosperity can sometimes rival security as a priority of states. Pevehouse and Goldstein (2017) established, "Neoliberal scholars try to show that even in a world of unitary rational states, the neorealists' pessimism about international cooperation is not valid. States can create mutual rules, expectations, and institutions to promote behavior that enhances cooperation" (p. 75).

According to neoliberalism, an institution or an international regime is a set of rules, norms, and procedures around which the expectations of actors converge in a certain issue area. International institutions operate by reciprocal contributions and concessions of formally equal members. For these scholars, states often have a mix of conflicting and mutual interest and even selfish states achieve cooperation because it is in their interest to do so, and they can learn to use institutions to ease the pursuit of mutual gains.

In contrast, this theory predicts that the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), supported Venezuela in the elections for the UN Human Rights Council because of a reciprocity strategy for achieving cooperation. On the same day as the elections, Venezuela released 24 political prisoners, which will lead to an increase in the release of political prisoners up to 222 between 2017 and 2019 (Singer, 2019).

. They would also argue that Costa Rica nominated itself in the elections because they wanted to cooperate with the United States in order to guarantee their relationship by denying a power position for Venezuela at the international level. Costa Rica doesn't have an army and a crisis in the region occasioned by Venezuela could affect Costa Rica because of the proximity within those states, so this strategy of nominating itself for the elections pursues long-term mutual gains. It's all about cooperation and reciprocity between the states because, on the perspective of this theory, norms and institutions can shape anarchy.

Data and Interpretation

The Human Rights Council is an intergovernmental organism within the United Nations system created in 2006 and it's composed of 47 states responsible for the promotion and protection of all human rights worldwide. It has the ability to discuss all the various thematic issues related to human rights and situations that require attention throughout the year. The Council has 47 member states, which are elected by the majority of the members of the United Nations General Assembly through direct and secret voting. According to the Resolution 60/251, the General Assembly is supposed to consider the contribution of the candidate states to the promotion and protection of human rights, as well as voluntary promises and commitments in this regard.

On October 17, 2019, the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly elected 14 new members of the Council to perform their functions for a period of three years, beginning in January 2020. What was surprising is that Venezuela got elected to be one of those members, in representation of Latin America. However, the onslaught against opponents in Venezuela and the lack of measures that address the humanitarian emergency, which is mostly attributable to the Venezuelan authorities, raises serious doubts that Venezuela is a suitable candidate to integrate the United Nations Human Rights Council. (Ansorena, 2019).

For the government of Nicolás Maduro, his election to be part of the UN Human Rights Council is a remarkable diplomatic success. The statements of the U.S, the candidacy of Costa Rica, designed at the last minute to displace Venezuela, and the claims of different civil organizations didn't work.

In the end, Venezuela won, and Maduro was able to improve his public image, which prior to this was that of a repudiated leader. For the U.S, this election's results gave new evidence that its policy towards Venezuela is not achieving the objectives it claims to pursue. Sanctions hit Venezuelans, but the government remains where it was, and its diplomatic pressure has, at least in the United Nations, less weight than support for Maduro from China, Russia and others.

Why did 105 countries vote for Venezuela for this position? Even when they had another option, Costa Rica, which only received 96 votes. It is important to mention that this event can be interpreted as an endorsement of Maduro because it occurred at a time when the Venezuelan political crisis had stagnated, even though that doesn't explain the election's results.

Richard Gowan, director of an IGO called International Crisis Group, said in an interview for VOA “No creo que lo que vimos el jueves fue que 105 países ven que Venezuela es un ejemplo de respeto a los derechos humanos.” (Arredondo, 2019)² In fact, the list of member states of the Council, with such questionable participants as Cuba, Saudi Arabia, and Eritrea make other countries realize that this is much more a matter of power and influence than respect for human rights. For some scholars, that Venezuela got selected to the Council has a clear objective: to look away from the abuses that are committed in Venezuela and in its allied countries, as a diversionary foreign policy strategy.

Conclusion

In order to analyze the results of those elections in the UN Human Rights Council, it's necessary to know which countries voted for Venezuela and what interests (economic or political) those countries could have, but the vote was anonymous. However, what can be analyzed is the interest behind the actions of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and Costa Rica, which was supposed to run for election in 2022 and advanced their nomination, two weeks before the election, to compete against Venezuela and prevent it from winning a position on the UN Human Rights Council.

From a classical realist perspective, the reasoning behind the NAM's actions were power and control. If Venezuela won, they would have certain control over the agenda and over the resolutions that were inconvenient for NAM's interests, but this statement can't be true. The election of Venezuela doesn't necessarily mean that the Human Rights

² Translation: I don't think what we saw on Thursday was that 105 countries see that Venezuela is an example of respect for human rights.

Council will be silenced with respect to Venezuela. A clear example is that of 2018, when Venezuela was in the council and Maduro was in power, the UN Human Rights Council asked the government to accept the entry of humanitarian aid to the country and made a request to the High Human Rights Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, to prepare a complete report of the situation in the country.

The more logical explanation for this is a neoliberal assumption, based on a reciprocity strategy for achieving cooperation. If Venezuela won, they would release more political prisoners. On the other hand, the classic realist and neoliberal assumptions explain it in a similar way, the involvement of Costa Rica and the United States in this whole matter. The states are unitary and rational, but they also cooperate together because of their self-interest: for the United States, it was influence; and for Costa Rica, it was security. It's all about balancing power and resources but also cooperation to achieve mutual long-term gains.

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