

## **An Open Letter to Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch**

Dear Kenneth Roth,

In your Introduction to Human Rights Watch's *World Report 2012*, ["Time to Abandon the Autocrats and Embrace Rights."](#) you urge support for the newly elected governments that have brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Tunisia and Egypt. In your desire to "constructively engage" with the new governments, you ask states to stop supporting autocrats. But you are not a state; you are the head of an international human rights organization whose role is to report on human rights violations, an honorable and necessary task which your essay largely neglects.

You say, "It is important to nurture the rights-respecting elements of political Islam while standing firm against repression in its name," but you fail to call for the most basic guarantee of rights—the separation of religion from the state. Salafi mobs have caned women in Tunisian cafes and Egyptian shops; attacked churches in Egypt; taken over whole villages in Tunisia and shut down Manouba University for two months in an effort to exert social pressure on veiling. And while "moderate Islamist" leaders say they will protect the rights of women (if not gays), they have done very little to bring these mobs under control. You, however, are so unconcerned with the rights of women, gays, and religious minorities that you mention them only *once*, as follows: "Many Islamic parties have indeed embraced disturbing positions that would subjugate the rights of women and restrict religious, personal, and political freedoms. But so have many of the autocratic regimes that the West props up." Are we really going to set the bar that low? This is the voice of an apologist, not a senior human rights advocate.

Nor do you point to the one of the clearest threats to rights—particularly to women and religious and sexual minorities—the threat to introduce so-called "shari'a law." It is simply not good enough to say we do not know what kind of Islamic law, if any, will result, when it is already clear that freedom of expression and freedom of religion—not to mention the choice not to veil—are under threat. And while it is true that the Muslim Brotherhood has not been in power for very long, we can get some idea of what to expect by looking at their track record. In the UK, where they were in exile for decades, unfettered by political persecution, the exigencies of government, or the demands of popular pressure, the Muslim Brotherhood systematically promoted gender apartheid and parallel legal systems enshrining the most regressive version of "shari'a law". Yusef al-Qaradawi, a leading scholar associated with them, publicly maintains that homosexuality should be punished by death. They supported deniers of the holocaust and the Bangladesh genocide of 1971, and shared platforms with salafi-jihadis, spreading their calls for militant jihad. But, rather than examine the record of Muslim fundamentalists in the West, you keep demanding that Western governments "engage."

Western governments are engaged already; if support for autocrats was their Plan A, the Muslim Brotherhood has long been their Plan B. The CIA's involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood goes back to the 1950s and was revived under the Bush administration, while support for both the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat e Islaami has been crucial to the "soft counter-terror" strategy of the British state. Have you heard the phrases "non-violent extremism" or "moderate Islamism?" This language is deployed to sanitize movements that may have substituted elections for bombs as a way of achieving power but still remain committed to systematic discrimination.

Like you, we support calls to dismantle the security state and to promote the rule of law. But we do not see that one set of autocratic structures should be replaced by another which claims divine sanction. And while the overthrow of repressive governments was a victory and free elections are, in principle, a step towards democracy, shouldn't the leader of a prominent human rights organization be supporting popular calls to prevent backlash and safeguard fundamental rights? In other words, rather than advocating strategic support for parties who may use elections to halt the call for continuing change and attack basic rights, shouldn't you support the voices for both liberty and equality that are arguing that the revolutions must continue?

Throughout your essay, you focus only on the traditional political aspects of the human rights agenda. You say, for instance, that "the Arab upheavals were inspired by a vision of freedom, a desire for a voice in one's destiny, and a quest for governments that are accountable to the public rather than captured by a ruling elite." While this is true as far as it goes, it completely leaves out the role that economic and social demands played in the uprisings. You seem able to hear only the voices of the right wing—the Islamist politicians—and not the voices of the people who initiated and sustained these revolutions: the unemployed and the poor of Tunisia, seeking ways to survive; the thousands of Egyptian women who mobilized against the security forces who tore off their clothes and subjected them to the sexual assaults known as "virginity tests." These assaults are a form of state torture, usually a central issue to human rights organizations, yet you overlook them because they happen to women.

The way you ignore social and economic rights is of a piece with your neglect of women, sexual rights, and religious minorities. Your vision is still rooted in the period before the Vienna Conference and the great advances it made in holding non-state actors accountable and seeing women's rights as human rights. Your essay makes it all too clear that while the researchers, campaigners, and country specialists who are the arms and legs and body of Human Rights Watch may defend the rights of women, minorities, and the poor, the head of their organization is mainly interested in relations between states.

## **Organizations:**

Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) [www.ccmw.com](http://www.ccmw.com)

Center for a Secular Space (CSS), global

Marea, Italy

Nijeri Khor, Bangladesh

One Law for All, UK

Organisation Against Women's Discrimination in Iran, UK

Secularism Is a Women's Issue ([siawi.org](http://siawi.org)), global

Southall Black Sisters, UK

WICUR-Women's Initiative for Citizenship and Universal Rights, global

Women Living Under Muslim Laws ([wluml.org](http://wluml.org)), global

## **Individuals (organizations listed for identification purposes only)**

Dorothy Aken'Ova, Executive Director, INCREASE, Minna, Nigeria

Codou Bop, Coordinator, Research Group on Women and the Law, Senegal

Ariane Brunet, Co-Founder, Urgent Action Fund, Canada

Lalia Ducos, WICUR-Women's Initiative for Citizenship and Universal Rights

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