

# Human Rights Council: A Central Pivot for the Portuguese Foreign Policy

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Since relinquishing a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2012, the main goal of Portuguese diplomacy has been election to the Human Rights Council (HRC). This purpose was achieved with distinction: Portugal was elected for the 2015/2017 period having attained 184 of the 193 possible votes. Put another way, “Portugal obtained more votes than any of the previous representative countries within its HRC’s regional group”.<sup>1</sup> For the last two years, Portugal feared that other candidates would put forward a bid. Portugal’s consensual nature and good reputation surely benefited its successful candidacy, especially in terms of dissuading other bids, the likes of which would possibly undermine the clean slate.<sup>2</sup>

Although Portugal has thrice been member of the Human Rights Commission—1979/1981, 1988/1993, and 2000/2002—this is the first time it joins the HRC, created in order to replace the discredited Commission.

However, this was not the first time that Portugal has made a bid for the HRC. In 2006, at a time when the Portuguese

government had candidacies on a number of fronts,<sup>3</sup> the Portuguese bid turned out unsuccessful. Memories associated with this defeat led Portugal to prioritize future election. To put it bluntly, a second defeat “in one of the traditionally considered most difficult and important elections in the UN’s universe” would not be tolerated.<sup>4</sup>

The Portuguese bid, initiated by the previous government, was a natural step and thus undertaken with the same commitment by the incumbent Executive. Indeed, it is usual for a country that held a seat on the Security Council to try and prolong the hard-earned visibility by steadfastly presenting a candidacy for the HRC—widely regarded as the second most relevant institution within the UN.

Moreover, the HRC election accords with two central precepts of Portuguese foreign policy: on the one hand, “be represented in the main bodies” and “have an active role within international organizations” to which it belongs; on the other hand, maintain and uphold the Portuguese “tradition of human rights’ defense and promotion at the international level”.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the HRC election al-

1 Pedro Cordeiro, “Portugal eleito na ONU. Nem Machete previu uma votação tão expressiva” (*Expresso*, 21 de Outubro de 2014).

2 *Ibid.*

\* Published also in Portuguese: Paulo Gorjão, “Conselho de Direitos Humanos: um eixo central da política externa portuguesa” (*IPRIS Comentário*, No. 3, Outubro de 2014).

3 The HRC bid would indeed fail. Nonetheless, Portugal would succeed in the re-election of Paula Escarameia for a second mandate, between 2007 and 2011, in the UN International Law Commission. Portuguese diplomacy would also be successful in November 2006, when it guaranteed a place on the Council of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). The ITU is the UN agency responsible for issues concerning information and communication technologies.

4 “Portugal eleito para o Conselho de Direitos Humanos da ONU” (*Governo de Portugal*, 21 de Outubro de 2014).

5 “Portugal eleito para o Conselho de Direitos Humanos da ONU” (*Lusa*, 21 de Outubro de 2014).



lows Portugal to carry on the strategy of maximizing the country's diplomatic visibility, namely in the geopolitical areas in which it is inserted. This has been a successful strategy, as the facts can confirm.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Portugal has a solid reputation as a human rights defender, even though *realpolitik* has at times recommended a less active commitment. The way Portuguese diplomacy pressed Equatorial-Guinea's regime to adopt a moratorium on the death penalty before being accepted as a full member of the CPLP clearly portrays the importance that Portugal assigns to respect for human rights. There are a number of other examples: for instance, the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has an organogram that underlines the relevance given to this matter, namely through the existence of a Human Right Section in it.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising then that Portugal may approach the HRC mandate with a bucket full of priorities,<sup>8</sup> while at

the same time beginning this three-year term with an elevated diplomatic ego. Despite the harsh years that Portugal went through under foreign assistance and budget restrictions, which have not spared the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the dimension of the achieved voting score seems to confirm that Portuguese diplomacy continues to enjoy prestige and good reputation. Those are small signs that it is possible for Portugal to be placed in a category other than its traditional one, and thus punching above its weight.

6 To keep it short and looking just a few years back: between July and December 2007 Portugal had the EU Council's presidency; between July 2008 and June 2010 held the CPLP's presidency; In November/December 2009 hosted the XIX Ibero-American Summit; in November 2010 organized the NATO Summit in Lisbon; between 2011 and 2012 held a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council; in 2013, within the Mediterranean framework, simultaneously assumed the 5+5 Dialogue and 5+5 Initiative of Defense.

7 This organogram is integrated on the Direção de Serviços das Organizações Políticas Internacionais (SPM).

8 Beyond the "defense of the death penalty's abolition", the Portuguese Foreign Affairs Ministry promises to present "resolutions on the right to education and on economic, social and cultural rights". Portugal equally commits to pay "special attention to the elimination of violence over women, to the elimination of every form of discrimination and to the protection of the most vulnerable people and groups". In addition, the Portuguese diplomacy promises commitment in "the defense of diverse themes such as the right to water and sanitation, gender equality, journalists' safety and security, and the civil society's liberty. See "Portugal eleito para o Conselho de Direitos Humanos da ONU" (*Governo de Portugal*, 21 de Outubro de 2014).

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