

February 2020



# Iceland in the Human Rights Council

## Executive summary

# Summary

Iceland was elected to the United Nations Human Rights Council in July 2018 and served for the first time as an elected member until the end of 2019. Iceland's membership of the Council is undoubtedly among the most important roles Iceland has played on the international stage. With that in mind, it was considered reasonable to assess the outcome, and this report is the result of the work undertaken at the end of Iceland's term on the Human Rights Council.

The Council has 47 members at any given time, of which seven are from the Western-Europe and Others Group. Each electoral term lasts three years, but since the United States of America withdrew from the Council in the middle of its term, Iceland was elected to take its place.

## The growing role of human rights

The report discusses the lead-up to Iceland's election to the Council, and provides a short introduction on the role of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The fact that the role of human rights has always been part of Iceland's foreign policy is discussed, as well as how this role has been expanding in recent years, including through participation in the activities of the Human Rights Council. A turning point in this regard came when Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson became the first Icelandic Minister for Foreign Affairs to attend the high-level segment of the Council's March 2017 session. In his statement he highlighted the need for HRC members to lead by example and improve the status of human rights at home. One could argue that another, comparable address he made the following year played a part in building the trust that was needed for Iceland to be considered a good option to fill the gap left by the United States in the summer of 2018.

Another reason for the support shown to Iceland for filling this role was Iceland's leadership in bringing attention to the situation of human rights in the Philippines in the autumn of 2016, in particular the methods the new president, Rodrigo Duterte, chose to employ in order to address the country's drug problem, that included extrajudicial executions, which of course go against all human rights norms.

The report describes the preparations that began a shortly prior to Iceland's election to the Human Rights Council. Iceland's representation before the Human Rights Council needed to be strengthened in a quick and purposeful manner, and Iceland's priorities in the Council needed to be defined.

## Iceland takes a decisive leadership role

A decision was made to consult actively with the Foreign Affairs Committee prior to each session of the Human Rights Council. Additionally, an emphasis was placed on transparency in all of Iceland's activities on the Council. The

Icelandic authorities wanted to use this opportunity to make an impact, to increase their participation in the Council's activities and take an initiative concerning certain issues that warranted the Council's attention.

Iceland garnered the international media attention in March 2019, when it initiated a joint statement by 36 countries on the situation of human rights in Saudi Arabia, the Minister for Foreign Affairs having previously, in his addresses to the Council in 2017 and 2018, criticised how some states seemed to be exempt from being discussed by the Council. It is important in this regard to note that Saudi Arabia was, at that time, an elected member of the Human Rights Council and that in the guiding resolution establishing the Human Rights Council, a special responsibility was placed on Council members to be in a leadership role when it comes to human rights. Iceland had, on several previous occasions, discussed the poor situation of gender equality in Saudi Arabia in its addresses to the Council, but this was the first time that a group of states jointly levelled such criticism.

Iceland also took the initiative to have the Human Rights Council adopt a resolution on the situation of human rights in the Philippines, on the basis of its previous leadership role. Mandated by this resolution, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights will deliver a report on the human rights situation in the Philippines to the Council's 2020 summer session. Unfortunately, instead of reacting to the resolution by working to improve the situation, the Philippines attempted to block the adoption of the resolution. However, the resolution was eventually passed, and the outcome was noted worldwide and widely welcomed. It is again important to note that the Philippines are currently a member of the Human Rights Council and should therefore be especially concerned leading by example.

## **Emphasis on equality and women's rights**

Iceland's participation in the Human Rights Council's during its membership was characterised by an emphasis on equality and women's rights. This was reflected in the participation of Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir in the Human Rights Council's 2019 summer session and the adoption of the resolution by Iceland and several other states on equal pay for men and women.

Iceland was also strongly committed to upholding the rights of LGBTI+ people in its advocacy. This is a sensitive discussion within the arena of international cooperation, considering the vast effort needed to promote a paradigm shift among many nations. It was therefore considered to be important for Iceland to contribute to this cause, and it succeeded in doing so.

Iceland also placed an emphasis on exerting itself to improve the operation of the Human Rights Council and, while there is still work to be done, important steps were taken in this regard.

Finally, we attempt to learn something from this historic task. It can be safely stated that the United States' withdrawal from the Human Rights Council gave Iceland an opportunity to take a seat in the Council without running a costly and time-consuming election campaign. Human rights are the cornerstone of the foreign policy and the Icelandic people consider them fundamental. It became clear during this term that we have a good reputation in that regard and a lot to offer.

## **Iceland can have a decisive impact**

This report also concludes that Iceland and the Icelandic foreign service are fully capable of handling a project of this kind. The experience also showed how important it is to have a clear intent to act decisively, as well as having predefined emphases with identified objectives and measures to fulfil them. It is likewise the conclusion of this report that small states like Iceland can make a decisive difference, although it is equally clear that consultation and cooperation with other like-minded states is also necessary.

Finally, the report concludes that although the United Nations Human Rights Council is not perfect and that criticism of its activities sometimes becomes very loud, it is the main forum for the nations of the world to have an honest discussion about human rights issues, both within individual states and regarding individual issues.

The report's final chapter looks to the future and asks whether there is, in light of the newly acquired experiences, reason for Iceland to seriously consider running for a seat in the Human Rights Council again, this time for a full three-year term.