

Tehran's red card to human rights

By Nasrin Alavi,

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The United Nations inaugurated its new [Human Rights Council](#) [1] in Geneva on Monday 19 June 2006, replacing the discredited human-rights commission. It should be a historic, inclusive, optimistic moment that marks a new departure for the world body and for the cause of human rights worldwide.

But between the thought and the act falls the shadow. The launch of the new body was witnessed by two Iranian representatives whose human-rights records – even by the standards of the Islamic Republic – are infamous: justice minister [Jamal Karimirad](#) [2] and Tehran's prosecutor-general Saeed Mortazavi.

Mortazavi was the presiding judge of the infamous Court 1410 and hailed as the "butcher of the press" for his vicious rulings against journalists and free thinkers. He is credited with the closure of more than 100 publications and the harassment and imprisonment of many writers, activists, lawyers and bloggers in recent years. [Shirin Ebadi](#) [2], the lawyer and Nobel laureate, has even accused Mortazavi of being present in 2003 when Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi was tortured and killed.

Mortazavi's arrival at the UN has rightly provoked an [outcry](#) [3] from human-rights groups. He is undeterred. His first official meeting in Geneva was with Zimbabwe's infamous minister of justice, [Patrick Chinamasa](#) [4].

Mortazavi also told Iranian news-agency [reporters](#) [5] in Geneva that the United States "should be put high on the agenda of the UN Human Rights Council" for abuses in Bagram, Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib (he added that "nuclear technology for peaceful purposes" is a basic right of all nations).

Mortazavi comes to the United Nations concerned by "Islamophobia" and "the instrumental use of human rights by the west", arguing that the "holy concept" of human rights should be more susceptible to Islamic sensibilities.

Yet the regime that appeals to Islamic traditions is readily willing to crush dissent when it suits it to do so and it has imprisoned many prominent members of the *Shi'a* clergy such as [Mohsen Kadivar](#) [6], [Abdollah Nouri](#) [7] and [Mojtaba Lotfi](#) [8] just to name a few. It is also unique in Iran's Islamic history for having kept under house arrest a Grand Ayatollah ([Montazeri](#) [9]). In 2004 Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, stated that the Iranian people did not go through a revolution in order to "substitute absolutist rule by the crown with one under the turban".

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Rhetoric and reality

Saeed Mortazavi's authoritarian methods have less to do with any specific culture or religion, than with common elements shared by culturally disparate states such as Zimbabwe and Iran whose governments exhibit contempt for human rights.

It is courtesy of Mortazavi that Iran could be called the "biggest prison for journalists in the middle east". Yet this ominous accolade also indicates that large numbers of Iranians are willing to stand for their rights and raise their voice in the debate about their country's democratic future.

One such veteran Iranian journalist, the recently exiled [Massoud Behnood \[11\]](#), who was imprisoned by Mortazavi. Behnood, writes [online \[12\]](#) that the Iranian regime's promotion of Mortazavi to the Human Rights Council frontline may well be a demonstration of Tehran's current confidence.

Indeed, there is a sense of growing [bravado \[13\]](#) in the recent stance of the Tehran regime. This was audible in the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei's speech addressed to United States leaders on 4 June 2006: "if you could hurt the Islamic Republic, you would not waste even one minute". Today, the Americans appear bogged down in Iraq and far from creating a secure springboard for further regime change; instead, they seem to have empowered leaders uncannily reminiscent of Iran's ruling ayatollahs.

Iraq's largest and most influential *Shi'a* party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (Sciri) was initially headed by an Iraqi-born ayatollah, Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, who today presides over the Iranian judiciary.

It seems that the Iraqis are only beginning a journey that Iran set out on a quarter of century ago. Yet despite the international posturing by Iran's government, the ruling elite are beset by [internal strife \[14\]](#). Moreover, Iran's economy (supported by one of the world's largest oil reserves) is crippled by corruption and negligence. The Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presidency has not produced employment or prosperity, and is damaged by an [inflationary spiral \[15\]](#) that has been exacerbated by government policies. It must also ultimately answer to the demands of Iran's educated youth who make up 70% of the population.

It has taken two decades, but even grand ayatollahs and other warhorses of the revolution have turned against the system they helped to create. [Akbar Ganji \[16\]](#), imprisoned for six years by Saeed Mortazavi for exposing a "power-mafia" network behind the murders of writers and intellectuals, is one who challenges the regime and remains a consistent defender of human rights against the system's cultivation of fear.

Iranian writers, activist and journalists like Ganji have been at the [frontline \[16\]](#) of the battlefield that is at the heart of the struggle for the future of Iran. They have not asked to be precision bombed into democracy, nor have they sought [financial aid \[17\]](#) to start a revolution. They are

peacefully but assuredly struggling to change their societies from within. The least that the United Nations can do – for its own legitimacy, if not for the Iranian people – is to expel from its midst an infamous opponent of human rights and human freedom like Saeed Mortazavi.

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