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## June Roundtable: Introduction

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## June Roundtable: Introduction

### Abstract

An annotation of:

"A Screaming Start: The UN and Human Rights." The Economist. April 24, 2008.

### Keywords

Human rights, United Nations, United Nations Human Rights Council

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**"A Screaming Start: The UN and Human Rights." *The Economist*. April 24, 2008.**

An annotation

The formation of the new United Nations Human Rights Council in 2006, out of the ashes of the Commission on Human Rights, marked a step toward correcting the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the previous attempt at governance. The Council's advocates raised issues concerned with the fact that the Commission was not credible because it listed infamously abusive states among its membership. These supporters were confronted by opponents to the Council such as former U.S. Ambassador John Bolton, a long-time critic of the U.N., who argued that nothing had changed when Cuba, China and Pakistan were among the first countries to join the new body. Two years into its infancy, it seems appropriate to consider how the Human Rights Council has improved upon its predecessor, as well as in what ways it has not.

**"This [universal periodic review] marks the main difference between the council and its predecessor. The commission often focused on just a dozen states, which complained they were singled out because they lacked enough big friends to keep critics at bay."**

One step taken to improve governance and credibility is the establishment of a universal periodic review which all member states must submit to the Council every four years. Consisting of a self-evaluation, a report by the High Commissioner and a report by human rights groups and other relevant stakeholders, this review aims to inject egalitarianism and subject all states to the same processes and criteria before the Council makes its conclusive report. While this sounds like a convoluted system that could be easily manipulated, it also may be the first attempt at democratizing a situation hindered by entrenched power relations.

**"The Muslim and non-aligned states often blame the West for focusing on abuses in poor countries while ignoring its own faults. But they rarely take any action in the council over alleged rich-world misdeeds such as mistreatment of terror suspects. That may be because poor, angry countries hesitate to threaten their relationship with powerful partners and aid donors by taunting them over human rights."**

In matters of global governance, power differentiation is an inevitable roadblock, and agenda-setting in bodies such as the Council is a clear exercise of power. In this case, as the Council becomes more democratic in its processes there remain inequalities that play out by preventing full, honest discussion of human rights records of *all* member states of the United Nations. It remains to be seen whether or not the Council makes decent strides toward fairness in its reporting and judgment.

**These issues and others are considered in this month's Roundtable.**