

Why Starmer's Human Rights Approach Raises Questions

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Prime Minister Keir Starmer's record as a distinguished human rights lawyer once suggested he would be a staunch defender of international law. However, his cautious and sometimes ambiguous stance on key human rights issues has led observers to question whether his political decisions align with his past legal principles.

The international human rights system, the global framework of rules and standards designed to prevent state abuses, is facing unprecedented strain not seen since the aftermath of World War II. Keir Starmer's career background is impressive. He served as Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), argued cases before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and even represented Croatia under the Genocide Convention against Serbia in 2014. His deep legal expertise, including authorship on European human rights law, made him appear uniquely equipped to navigate these turbulent times.

Yet, in his role as prime minister, his critics argue that a different side has emerged. They point to instances where he has appeared hesitant to defend civil liberties, equated disruptive yet peaceful demonstrations with acts of terrorism, and called for the exclusion of certain artists from public platforms based on their political or artistic expressions. Detractors also highlight occasions when he has criticised judicial decisions and actions that risk undermining the independence of the courts, a core pillar of human rights protection.

Supporters acknowledge his pragmatic approach, suggesting he is carefully balancing security concerns with legal obligations. However, others view this as political expediency, noting moments where he avoided taking a clear stance on matters involving life-and-death consequences. Some longtime admirers admit this pragmatic style contrasts sharply with the uncompromising principles he once championed in his legal career.

The result is a growing public debate over whether the prime minister can reconcile his history as a defender of justice with the realities of political leadership. While his legal credentials remain unmatched, the question persists: is his current caution a matter of necessary strategy, or a departure from the values that built his reputation?