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## **UN Reform**

### **An Analysis**

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#### **Need for Reform**

The UN needs reform. On that everyone agrees. But people disagree sharply on what kind of reform is needed and for what purpose. NGO leaders aim for a more democratic UN, with greater openness and accountability. Technocrats seek more productivity and efficiency from the UN's staff. Delegates favor reforms that conform to national interests and promote national power. Idealists offer plans for a greatly expanded body, that would reduce states' sovereignty. While conservatives push for a downsized UN with sharply reduced powers. Agreement is exceedingly hard to come by.

Since the 1950s, the UN has faced a constant barrage of management studies, policy reviews, reform proposals and even actual reforms. Secretary Generals have carried out substantial changes in the Secretariat, roughly every eight-years -- 1953-56; 1964-66; 1974-77; 1985-86; and 1992-present. Many reforms had hidden political agendas: they had policy goals, cloaked by technocratic jargon or universal principles.

Few reformers are willing to admit that the UN's complex and inefficient machinery results from deep political disagreements among its members and between other contending forces in the global system. In a world divided by chasms between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, differences of interest are certain to shape all reform efforts and keep the UN a contradictory and divided institution.

#### **Complex and Decentralized Architecture**

The founders of the UN designed it to be highly decentralized, with power shared among the Secretariat and a number of specialized agencies and other organs. Since 1945, member states have added dozens of new agencies, programs,

funds and other operational units, also relatively autonomous. Turf wars are endemic and the powers of the Secretary General are limited. Agencies often work at cross purposes -- or at least fail to maintain effective coordination. Member states could mandate more focus for the system but they don't, probably because they can't agree on what it should be.

Even in the core programs of the UN, there is rarely a clarity of purpose or unity of structure. Decision-making bodies have proliferated along with administrative ones. The number of meetings has risen sharply, along with costs for interpreters, verbatim records and reports. There is lots of duplication. But considering the enormous range of questions the UN considers and the deep differences that divide the nations, it's a wonder that the organization's architecture has lasted as well as it does.

Reformers of all camps agree that the Secretariat should be re-designed to function more smoothly, and no member is more adamant on this than the United States. But by slashing budgets, the US has blocked the kind of computerization and staff training that would help to reach this clear efficiency goal. And by forcing downsizing, the US has created instability and sagging staff morale, neither of which promote efficiency.

Reforms are possible and needed, but they must proceed by complex bargaining, so that all member states feel they are winning at least something in the process. The people of the world are largely bystanders to this intergovernmental horse-trading.

### **Recent Reform Initiatives**

Secretary General Boutros-Ghali launched the first round of current "reforms" at the beginning of his term -- in February 1992. The new Secretary General fired 14 top administrators and abolished a dozen operating units. He said he had consulted widely and studied 22 different re-organization proposals, but according to well-informed sources the United States Mission had a big influence on the outcome. The Centre for Transnational Corporations, one of the UN's most respected bodies, virtually disappeared after the 1992 reforms, victim of a long campaign by the International Chamber of Commerce. At one stroke, the CTC lost its organizational autonomy, its director and much of its budget. In the same reforms, the Secretary General downgraded the UN's work on disarmament and shifted development aid towards "technical assistance." All of the UN's top women lost their posts. [[Click here for more on the 1992 reforms](#)] After those early reforms, the Secretary General was expected to move further to reorganize the Secretariat, but he didn't, probably because of strong counter-pressures.

Since then, talk of reform has intensified. In the runup to the 50th Anniversary, literally dozens of commissions and study groups made recommendations for change. Rhetoric often suggested a world of "neighbors," a spirit of cooperation and solidarity, but reformers in less guarded moments spoke of more traditional and less idealistic goals. At an early 1995 meeting in New York to launch *Our Global Neighborhood*, the report of the Commission on Global Governance, former World Bank president Barber Conable explained that the UN must be strengthened "because the United States will not be willing to police the world and the world may not be willing to be policed by the United States." Mr. Conable's enthusiasms about the UN as the world's policeman are not widely shared by ordinary citizens, but they probably reflect a shared perspective among high-level global managers.

Many reform proposals produced in the United States and Europe suggest "streamlining" the UN, reducing its budget and "reinventing" or "reengineering" it, in a spirit of efficiency and "realism." The language of many such reformers conveys a message of technocratic and apolitical goals, but they often conceal conservative, neoliberal aims. Some proposals seek to downplay UN economic and social activities and to transfer them to the Bretton Woods Institutions or simply turn them over to the workings of the marketplace.

### **Business Critics**

The business press is particularly critical of the UN, reflecting the common corporate distaste for public programs, taxes and regulation. Typical articles, editorials and opinion pieces complain that the UN is a bastion of regulation, and that it regularly imposes annoying new rules in the name of the environment, worker rights, species protection, peace and other woolly-headed ideals. A March 1996 issue of *The Economist*, noting the UN's financial woes, commented with satisfaction: "the doers of good are having a rough time." It described the International Labour Organization as "an oversized think-tank" and concluded that ILO is in trouble because "worrying about workers is out of fashion these days."

In October 1995, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a piece that targeted the "U.N.'s Bio-Cops," charging that "U.N. officials are now jostling to become international environmental super-regulators" who are eager to burden biotechnology firms "with a sweeping variety of new, and unnecessary regulations." The *Journal* expresses the same shrill and exaggerated opposition towards many other UN programs, because the UN often works with public agencies and sponsors concerted global action. In May 1996, it ran a story an article on the World Health Organization, charging that WHO "undermines the traditional moral structures of both East and West and provide(s) justification for the never-ending expansion of the welfare state."

## **Conservative Think Tanks**

The business-driven critique, especially strong in the United States and Britain, has been nurtured since the early 1980s by conservative think tanks like the Washington-based Heritage Foundation that see themselves as watchdogs of individual "freedom" against the tyranny of governments and intergovernmental agencies like the UN. Generously funded by grants from private foundations, wealthy individuals and corporations, these think tanks have vilified the UN as a rat hole of sloth, ignorance, foreign intrigue and -- above all -- collectivism. "The war against economic freedom, the free enterprise system and multinational corporations permeates the U.N. structure," affirmed a Heritage report in 1984. Heritage aimed a barrage of more than 100 policy papers at the UN during the 1980's.

The Heritage analysis is contradictory at best. On the one hand, it insists that the UN is incompetent and gets nothing done -- that it is a "talkfest." On the other hand, Heritage warns that the UN is on the verge of becoming a powerful world government, that its propaganda is a danger to humanity and that its regulations are about to strangle the world economy. In one policy paper, for instance, Heritage told its friends to hang onto their wallets because the UN favors a "forced redistribution of global resources."

Heritage has always focused on the alleged high cost of the UN. Heritage was first to urge Congress to withhold assessments. Heritage policy papers frame the issue of UN finances in very exaggerated terms, insisting that the UN's costs are "enormous" and that they are spiralling upwards uncontrollably. Heritage has never placed UN costs in any comparative context, especially not in terms of military outlays. The UN's financial crisis today can be directly traced to the Heritage-led campaign of the 1980's and the corporate forces that bankrolled it.

In the 1990's, the Heritage bile has been outdone by the Cato Institute, a still more radically free-market institution, bankrolled by the likes of IBM and Coca Cola. Increasingly, these think tanks have made their mark in the political arena, riding the wave of conservative electoral victories and whipping up anti-UN hysteria in the halls of the US Congress, on the airwaves and on the editorial pages.

## **Mass Media Hostility**

The general mass media, often themselves corporate empires like Disney, Time-Warner and Murdoch's News Corporation, have readily adopted a harsh view of the UN and frequently trumpeted its need to "reform or die." Media stories often echo the line of Heritage, Cato and other neoliberal think tanks. Media sources have commonly charged that the UN is a "vast bloated bureaucracy," that its

staff is incompetent and riddled with fraud, and that it gets nothing done. The media have often pictured intergovernmental organs such as ECOSOC and the General Assembly as absurd "talking shops" where knaves hold forth and where endless blather produces nothing of importance. And they have emphasized peacekeeping failures as proof that the UN cannot succeed. These stereotypes support moves to slash UN budgets. They certainly do not support a thoughtful and constructive reform process aimed at creating a stronger and more effective institution. Nor do they offer alternative means to address global problems.

Well-meaning reformers often find these attacks puzzling and incomprehensible, attributing them to public ignorance, legislative hypnosis, or leadership incompetence. Media stories stoke the confusion, by focusing attention on anti-UN sentiments of the right-wing militia and similar fringe groups, while passing in silence over the corporate critics and ignoring the enormous public support for the UN and cooperative solutions for global problems.

### **Varied Views**

Approaches to UN reform vary widely. If US policy makers, military strategists and business leaders find less need for the United Nations in a world they hope to dominate unilaterally, leaders in other nations have different visions. They **need** a revitalized United Nations as a shield against great power pressure and as a means to solve global problems through joint action. They may feel more directly threatened by the chaos of the neoliberal world and by the destabilizing changes of "free trade" as organized by US business interests. Local political traditions may also incline them to more collectivist solutions. These differences help explain why there are so many different approaches to reform, why poor countries are ready to fight for a strong development role for the UN, and why even close US allies like Canada favor a strengthened and better-funded world body.

Most observers recognize that the reform process is a battle over policy, not simply a management upgrade. The policy battles take place on many fronts: less vs. more environmental regulation, less vs. more initiative on disarmament, less vs. more concern for human rights and poverty, and so on. But the overarching policy issue is the [struggle between Keynesianism and neoliberalism](#): should there be a strong state that provides regulation and social protection, or should capital and the international market make the rules. Some believe that the US government's assault on the UN and its demands for downsizing are fundamentally an effort to purge the organization of its Keynesian (or social democratic) staff and to clear the decks for a hard-headed neoliberal future, committed to the religion of the market and the unfettered reign of multinational finance.

Because of these deep policy differences, the reform process has no clear agreed-on goal, either in institutional terms or in terms of policy outcomes. Like all conflict-riven politics, it is a complex process of bargaining, jostling, posturing and outright threats, reconciling very divergent interests, as well as different views of the world and preferences on how global society should be organized.

### **Reform Working Groups**

Beginning in 1994, the General Assembly has set up five working groups to discuss aspects of reform of the United Nations. Some of the working groups have met many dozens of times over a long period. The working group on the Security Council, for example, has been meeting since January 1994, while the most recent working group -- on the Strengthening of the UN System -- has been meeting only since January 1996.

The working groups meet in closed sessions, excluding the press and accredited NGOs as well as the general public. Their working papers are strictly private. Though the working groups discuss extremely important issues that can effect the lives of all the world's citizens, their discussions proceed without any public accountability. There is great potential for abuse of power here, as governments with financial and military muscle can threaten others to get their own way. The reform negotiations epitomize the antidemocratic pressures in the UN system, as states that themselves are formally democratic hide behind sophisticated propaganda and charge the UN with incompetence, inefficiency, and "elephantine" bureaucracy to push through self-serving changes.

### **Deadlock**

In spite of these pressures, the working groups have been mostly deadlocked. The working group on the Security Council has seen more than two and a half years of very intensive discussions, but it has reached little agreement except at the level of vague generalities -- such as the need to expand the Council's size. In the spring of 1996, the missions began to send lower-level representatives, signalling their doubts that serious reforms would emerge. During the consultations in early June, Russian ambassador Sergey Lavrov gave a [statement to the Working Group](#) saying that in his opinion it had made "virtually no progress" despite vigorous constructive efforts by many states over a long period. "The same issues," he complained, "are being discussed over and over again."

Observers cite many reasons for the failure of progress, but the single most important reason seems to be that the richest and most powerful states insist on maintaining -- and even increasing -- their power at the UN, while the poorer and less powerful (where the great majority of the world's people live) are

fighting for a greater voice -- a more equitable and democratic global decision-making structure. Debates in the May meetings of the Security Council Working Group highlighted this clash. Many states vigorously criticised the veto, while four of the five Permanent Members equally vigorously defended it.

In the case of the Working Group on the Financial Situation, the group made considerable progress towards broadly-agreed reform of UN finances, but one country -- the United States -- refuses to comply with its dues obligations and so destroys the effectiveness of this group, since no final agreement is possible until the US pays up.

### **NGO Role?**

Since late 1993 when the process began, NGOs have been asking for access to the working groups -- to monitor and to provide ideas through direct testimony. At different times, General Assembly Presidents and Co-Vice-Chairmen of the working groups have promised to implement some kind of NGO consultation. But nothing has resulted from these promises. At the insistence of powerful states, the doors to the working groups have remained firmly shut.

GPF has joined with many NGO partners to lobby for access and for greater "transparency" of the negotiating process. GPF has also taken initiatives to bring NGO opinions into a public discussion, especially on the Financial Situation and on the Security Council. We have posted lots of information on this web site about the reform debate on the Security Council (see the [Security Council Page](#) for links, including speeches delivered in the closed-door Working Group). We have also posted much information on the financial crisis and how the crisis has been created to put pressure on UN members to agree to certain reforms (see the [Financial Crisis Page](#) for links).

Throughout the reform discussions, the United States government has taken an extremely hard-line position. It has threatened and pressured other member states, primarily by withholding its dues payments. Clinton Administration officials have announced several times that the US will only pay its debts if the UN adopts a package of reforms the US deems acceptable. Germany and Japan have employed a similar, if less extreme, strategy, by delaying their regular dues payments as a reminder of their claim to Security Council seats.

### **The Essy Group**

Much of the pressure to downsize (and weaken) the UN focused on the most recently-established reform working group -- ironically entitled the Working Group on Strengthening the UN System, but commonly called the "Essy Group" after the General Assembly President in whose term the group was set up. The

United States apparently saw this group as its main instrument for change, especially since its mandate included reform of the Secretariat. Amb. Colin Keating, the much-respected permanent representative of New Zealand, who was Co-Vice-Chairman of the Working Group, told journalists that he thought that reform could not proceed gradually but would have to take the form of a "Big Bang" -- a rather ominous reference.

But in fact, the Essy Group refused the downsizing pressures and its work explicitly assumed that "adequate resources will continue to be available." When it issued its report in the summer of 1996, the WG made some promising proposals. Observers thought its work could even open the way for the General Assembly to function more like a legislature and shape broad policy, rather than debating a series of disconnected resolutions. The reform process has many surprises. It is an unpredictable if dangerous battleground.

### **The Secretary General Dispute and Beyond**

In June of 1996, reform battles took a new turn as the United States government identified Secretary General Boutros-Ghali as an insufficiently enthusiastic supporter of UN "reform" and announced publicly that it opposed his candidacy for a second term. The United States stepped up the financial pressure by doling out slowly the dues payments agreed by Congress in late April. Tough negotiations over reform continued, but US financial maneuvers threatened a slow strangulation of the organization. Maurice Strong, longtime advocate of drastic UN downsizing, took a high-level appointment in August, which seemed to signal further unilateral reforms in the secretariat under the gun of US financial blackmail.

In November, the United States insisted on a new Secretary General and wielded its veto against Boutros-Ghali. After several weeks of deadlock, the Council elected a US-backed candidate, Kofi Annan of Ghana. Annan met with UN staff and promised that he opposed further cuts, but at the same time he appointed Maurice Strong as Undersecretary General for UN Reform. And he held private talks with conservative members of the US Congress in Washington. On his Washington visit, he announced that he would have a far-reaching reform program ready by the summer and he said he would aim to "streamline" the organisation.

As the US financial sword continues to hang over the UN, the reform debate continues in 1997. The media can be expected to express the usual opinions. The five GA working groups will again take up their efforts. Behind closed doors, even among diplomats, harsh words will be exchanged. The battle over "reform" and for the future of the UN will continue.