

Democratization of the United Nations

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Abstract

The United Nations is the only truly universal and global intergovernmental organization created to date. Established 74 years ago, it continues to be the only global international organization and actor that has an agenda encompassing the broadest range of governance issues. As the world's only truly global organization, it has become the foremost forum to address issues that transcend national boundaries and cannot be resolved by any one country acting alone. It is a complex system that serves as the central site for multilateral diplomacy, with the UN's General Assembly as center stage. Since the end of Cold War, the UN is not only addressing global problems like a democratic supranational body (not exactly emerging as a global government) adopting policies to reduce illiteracy, poverty, gender inequality, protecting environment. The MDGs and SDGs are aimed at the welfare of "We the Peoples of the United Nations". While the UN is promoting democracy at global level, there are serious demands aired for democratizing the world body itself. This paper aims to discuss (i) the objectives/ purposes, principles and the principal organs of the UN, (ii) the role of the UN in democratizing international relations, and (iii) the democratization of UN System through reforms to better its future prospects.

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) was established on 24 October 1945, i.e. 74 years ago. It is the only truly universal and global intergovernmental organization created to date. It was founded with 51 nations, now consists of 193 States as its members. The UN continues to be the only global international organization and actor that has an agenda encompassing the broadest range of governance issues. As the world's only truly global organization, the UN has become the foremost forum to address issues that transcend national boundaries and cannot be resolved by any one country acting alone. It is a complex system that serves as the central site for multilateral diplomacy, with the UN's General Assembly as center stage. Three weeks of general debate at the opening of each annual session of General Assembly draw foreign ministers and heads of States or Governments from small and large States to take advantage of the opportunity to address the nations of the world and to engage in intensive diplomacy.¹

The term 'democracy' does not appear in the UN Charter either as a condition of membership or as a goal of the UN. Neither is it mentioned in the International Bill of Human Rights.² Yet, the ideal of democratic governance underpins much of the UN's contemporary work. When the UN was founded, in addition to being an alliance against aggression, it was founded on the belief that stable, peaceful conditions within states would underpin peaceful and stable relations between them. Moreover, the Charter was written in the name of "We the People of the United Nations", rather than in the name of High Contracting Parties (which were the opening words in the Covenant of the League of Nations). The UN Charter did have the seeds of democracy in its text, as like any democratic State it wanted the well-being of entire mankind. Article 55 of the UN Charter spells details of its resolve to work for socio-economic development of human beings.

Objectives, Principles and Organs of the United Nations

Before we discuss the history of democratic engagement of the UN, it is essential to briefly outline here the UN's purposes, principles and its main Organs. The UN Charter explains that it has four purposes:

1. to maintain international peace and security;
2. to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples;

3. to cooperate in solving international economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems and in promoting respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
4. to be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in attaining these common ends.

In other words, the UN is mandated to safeguard peace and security “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”, to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, to uphold respect for international law and to promote social progress and better standards of life. UN’s original vision was built on four pillars; the first three – peace, development and human rights – have become increasingly intertwined and support a consistent and integrated framework of national and international priorities. The UN’s fourth founding pillar – sovereign independence – although largely achieved during the UN’s first two decades through decolonization, is now under scrutiny because of a concern for reasonable limits on state sovereignty.

The United Nations acts, to pursue its objectives, in accordance with the following principles:

- (i) It is based on the sovereign equality of all its members;
- (ii) All members are to fulfill in good faith their Charter obligations;
- (iii) They are to settle their international disputes by peaceful means and without endangering international peace and security and justice;
- (iv) They are to refrain from the threat or use of force against any other state;
- (v) Neither they nor any member or the UN interfere in domestic matters of any State.

To enable the UN to achieve its stated purposes and objectives the Organization has been equipped with six main Organs.

The **General Assembly**, perhaps the closest approximation of a world parliament, is main deliberative and legislative body. It is designed to utilize the time honoured technique of resolving problems by free and frank discussions. It is to function as the world’s permanent forum and a meeting place. It is created on the assumption that “war of words” is better than war fought with bombs and weapons. All UN Members are represented in it and each has one vote on the basis of sovereign equality. Decisions on ordinary matters are taken by simple majority. Important questions require two thirds of the vote.

The Assembly has the right to discuss and make recommendations on all matters within the scope of the UN Charter. Its decisions are not binding on member States, but they carry the weight of

world public opinion. Thus, it does not legislate like national parliament. But in the meeting rooms and corridors of the UN, representatives of almost all countries of the world – large and small, rich and poor, from diverse political and social systems – have a voice and vote in shaping the policies of the international community.

The Security Council is the organ to which the Charter gives primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. It can be convened at any time, even at midnight when peace is threatened. Member States are obligated to carry out its decisions. It has 15 members. Five of these – China, France, the Russian Federation, the UK, and the US – are permanent members, known as P5. The other 10 are elected by the Assembly for two year terms. A decision cannot be taken if there is “no” or negative vote by a permanent member (known as “veto”) on substantive questions. In common parlance, veto is known in the UN Charter as “Great Power unanimity” rule.

When a threat to *peace* is brought before the Council, it usually first asks the parties to reach agreement by peaceful means. The Council may undertake mediation or set forth principles for settlement. It may request the Secretary General to investigate and report on a situation. If fighting breaks out, the Council tries to secure a ceasefire. It may send peace-keeping units (observers or troops) to troubled areas, with the consent of the parties involved, to reduce tension and keep opposing forces apart. Unlike the General Assembly resolutions, its decisions are binding and it has the power to enforce its decisions by imposing economic sanctions and by ordering military action under the principle of “collective security”.

Absence or prevention of war does not automatically ensure a peaceful international system. To diminish the underlying causes of future conflicts that might lead to such threats to the peace or breach of peace, the founding fathers of the UN also provided mechanisms for economic and social progress and development and to promote higher standards of living. This job has been assigned to **the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)**, third main organ of UN. The ECOSOC has 54 members. It usually holds two-month long session each year. It coordinates the economic and social work of the UN and other specialized agencies and institutions – together known as the UN Family or simply as *the UN system*. It recommends and directs activities aimed at, among others, promoting economic growth of developing countries, administering development and humanitarian assistance projects, promoting the observance of human rights, ending discrimination against minorities, spreading the benefits of science and technology, and fostering world cooperation in areas such as better housing, family planning and crime prevention.

The Trusteeship Council was created to supervise the administration of 11 Trust Territories and to ensure that Governments responsible for their administration take adequate steps to prepare them for self-government and independence. It is gratifying to note that all these territories have attained independence by the end of 1994 and now this body has little work.

The International Court of Justice consists of 15 judges who are elected concurrently by the General Assembly and the Security Council. It resolves legal issues and interprets international treaties.

The Secretariat is the sixth main organ of the UN. It consists of a Secretary General and other staff and personnel who run the UN administration and carry out day-to-day work of the UN. Staff members are drawn from 193 members of UN. As international civil servants, they work for the UN as a whole, and pledge not to take or seek instructions from any government or outside authority. Calling upon some 41,000 staff members worldwide, the Secretariat services the other principal organs of the UN and administers the programmes and policies established by them. At its head is the Secretary-General, who is appointed by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council. Till now the office of the Secretary-General has been occupied by nine incumbents: Trygve Lie (Norway), Dag Hammarskjold (Sweden), U. Thant (Myanmar), Kurt Waldheim (Austria), Javier Perez de Cuellar (Peru), Boutros Boutros Ghali (Egypt), Kofi Annan (Ghana), Ban Ki-moon (Republic of Korea) and Antonio Guterres (Greece).

The UN's Democratic Engagement

The UN's democratic engagement can be explained in many ways. *Firstly*, although most people associate the United Nations with the issues of peace and security, the vast majority of the Organization's resources are in fact devoted to advancing the *Charter's* pledge to "promote higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development" (Article 55 of the UN Charter) for "We the People of the United Nations". United Nations development efforts have profoundly affected the lives and well-being of millions of people throughout the world. Guiding the UN endeavours is the conviction that lasting international peace and security are possible only if the economic and social well-being of people everywhere is assured.

Many of the economic and social transformations that have taken place globally since 1945 have been significantly affected in their direction and shape by the work of the United Nations. As the global centre for consensus-building, the UN has set priorities and goals for international cooperation to assist countries in their development efforts and to foster a supportive global economic environment. The UN has

provided a platform for formulating and promoting key new developmental objectives on the international agenda through a series of global conferences. It has articulated the need for incorporating issues such as the advancement of women, human rights, sustainable development, environmental protection and good governance into the development paradigm. Over the years, the world view of development has changed. Today, countries agree that sustainable development – development that promotes prosperity and economic opportunity, greater social wellbeing, and protection of environment – offers the best path forward for improving the lives of people everywhere.³ Today the UN provides food and assistance to 80 million people in 80 countries, supplies vaccine to 4 of the world's children and helps save 3 million lives a year, and assists and protects 67.7 million people fleeing war, famine and persecution. It fights extreme poverty, helping improve the lives of more than one billion people. It supports maternal health, helping over 1 million women a month overcome pregnancy risks.⁴ It tackles the global water crisis affecting over 2 billion people worldwide. It coordinates US \$24.7 billion appeal for the humanitarian needs of 145 million people.

Secondly, by adopting the policy of promoting gender equality and justice, through Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, MDGs and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN is addressing the problems of half of humanity, i.e., women. MDGs and SDGs have enshrined the objective of achieving gender justice and women empowerment. At their Millennium Summit in 2000, member States adopted the *Millennium Declaration*, which contained a set of wide-ranging goals for the future course of the UN. The *Declaration* was translated into a roadmap that included eight time bound and measurable goals to be reached by 2015, known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs aim to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and the empowerment of women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combative/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.

Out of 8 MDGs, five had gender perspectives: Goal 1 was concerning eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. Goal 2 aimed at achieving universal primary education. Goal 3 deals with promoting gender equality and empowerment of women; Goal 4 was to reduce child mortality; and, Goal 5 mandates improvement of maternal health.

It is generally agreed by most observers that MDGs have fallen short of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. Today women continue to be more likely than men to live in poverty, and more than 18 million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa are out of school. One of the

crucial reasons for the failure of MDGs in relation to women was their inability to address the deeply entrenched and interlocking factors that perpetuate women's disadvantage.⁵

On 25 September 2015 the General Assembly approved the new Development Agenda of 17 SDGs (and 169 targets). The text of the Agenda enshrines the basic premise of human rights-based approach, which is that human rights constitute the foundation and aim of development. The SDGs Agenda is grounded in the UDHR and human rights treaties, and seek "to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the development of all women and girls".

The new agenda also explicitly emphasizes the importance of women's human rights for development, noting that "the achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights". The SDG framework aims to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all. They are based on an inclusive agenda that could help tackle some of the development challenges of the world, like poverty, climate change and conflict. They are based of principles of inclusiveness and universality human rights. SDGs have to be achieved by 2030.

Goals 1 to 8 have gender dimensions: G1: end poverty; G2: end hunger and achieve food security; G3: ensure healthy lives for all; G4: ensure quality education for all; G5: achieve gender equality and empower all women / girls; G6: ensure availability of water and sanitation for all; G7: ensure affordable and sustainable energy for all; G8: promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.

SDG-5 is considered as a great step forward. It encompasses a multi-dimensional approach to gender equality with a wide range of targets that include ending discrimination and Violence Against Women, including trafficking and sexual (and other types of) exploitation; ending child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation; recognizing unpaid care and domestic work; promoting women's participation and opportunities for leadership; ensuring universal access to sexual health and reproductive rights; enabling ownership of land and other property, including natural resources; and providing access to intermediate technology.

All 17 SDGs are interconnected, that means that gains in any one area would catalyze achievements in others, with the potential to create greater synergies and impact. Three other accords adopted in 2015 play critical roles in the global development agenda: the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the *Sendai Framework* on disaster risk reduction.

Thirdly, NGOs role in global governance has been provided under Article 71 of the Charter. The role of NGOs has been increasing over the years. They represent the “conscience” of “the people” in whose name the UN Charter was drafted. They are increasingly exerting their voices on global issues along with other civil society groups. They have been described by Thomas Weiss as a “Third UN”, to complement Inis Claude’s distinction between the first UN, consisting of the arenas where member states debate issues and make recommendations and decisions, and the second UN, consisting of the UN and specialized agency secretariats. The roles of the third UN include advocacy, research, policy analysis, and the promotion of ideas. Its members frequently provide new ideas, advocate new policies, and mobilize public support for UN activities. It may be noted that more than 5000 NGOs are accredited to the UN.⁶ Thus, NGOs’ role establishes that civil society organizations have made UN functioning more democratic.

Fourthly, one of the greatest achievements of the UN is its role in the field of decolonization. It gave inspiration to millions of Africans and Asians people, who were under colonial rule, to claim the right of self-determination and independence. When the UN was founded in 1945, 80 of the present UN members were colonies. The UN helped many of them, having 750 million people, to achieve independence. With this development the International Relations have been democratized.⁷

Fifthly, as a democratic State is usually successful in resolving domestic conflicts, the UN does the same job at the international level. The UN has an impressive record of resolving many international conflicts. U.N. peacekeepers have, since 1945, undertaken over 60 field missions and negotiated 172 peaceful settlements that ended regional conflicts. Right now, peacekeepers are in 20 hot spots around the world trying to save lives and avert wars. Today UN keeps peace with 104, 000 peacekeepers in 14 operations around the world. It must be noted that the regular biennial budget of the UN for 2016-2017 was \$5.4 billion, which pays for UN activities, staff and basic infrastructure. For peacekeeping, the budget for the year 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2017 was \$ 7.87 billion. In comparison, every year the world spends nearly \$2 trillion on military expenditure. **Peace is far cheaper than war and a good value for money.**

Sixthly, UNHCR is one of the world’s foremost humanitarian organizations during some of the most serious displacement crisis in decades. Today’s conflicts have led to a huge rise in UNHCR’s activities as the number of people displace rose from 38 million in 2005 to over 65 million in 2017.⁸ *Seventhly*, one of the most significant achievements of the UN is the creation of a comprehensive body of human rights law – a universal and internationally protected code to which all nations can subscribe and all people aspire. It has defined a broad range of

internationally accepted rights, including civil, political, economic, cultural and social rights. It has International Bill of Human Rights (consisting of the Universal declaration of Human Rights, 1948, and the two International Covenants on civil and political, economic, social and cultural rights, 1966). Besides the International Bill of Rights, it has adopted nearly 80 human rights treaties or declarations. It has also established mechanisms to promote and protect these rights and to assist states in carrying out their responsibilities.

Eighthly, it is gratifying to note that more international law has been created through the UN in last seven decades than in the entire previous history of mankind. It has made major contributions towards expanding ‘the rule of law’ among nations through the codification of international law.

Finally, the UN assists some 50 countries a year with their elections.⁹ Since 1991 it has provided various forms of electoral assistance to more than 100 countries – including advisory services, logistics, training, civic education, computer applications, and other short-term observations.¹⁰ On 8 November 2007, the General Assembly proclaimed 15 September as the International Day of Democracy. Also, since 1988, the Assembly has adopted at least one resolution annually dealing with some aspect of democracy. The International Day of Democracy provides an opportunity to review the state of democracy in the world. Democracy is as much a process as a goal, and only with the full participation of and support by the international community, national governing bodies, civil society and individuals, can the ideal of democracy be made into a reality to be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere. Approximately \$1.5 billion each year is provided through UNDP alone to support democratic processes around the world, making the United Nations one of the largest providers of technical cooperation for democracy and governance globally. The political work of the United Nations requires that it promote democratic outcomes; the development agencies seek to bolster national institutions like parliaments, electoral commissions and legal systems that form the bedrock of any democracy; and the human rights efforts support freedom of expression and association, participation and the rule of law, all of which are critical components of democracy.

Democratizing the UN System¹¹

At the outset, let us discuss what we mean by ‘democratization’. Former Secretary General, Boutros-Boutros Ghali, defines “democratization as a process which leads to a more open, more participatory, less authoritarian society. Democracy is a system of government which embodies, in a variety of institutions and mechanisms, the ideal of political power based on the will of the people”.¹² According to Boutros-Ghali, there is a growing interest and demand among member

states in the democratization of the UN. At the Special Commemorative Meeting of the General Assembly held from 22-24 October 1995 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the UN, nearly every speaker, including 128 heads of State or Government addressed this important issue.¹³

Member States accuse the Security Council of being arrogant, secretive and undemocratic but the veto powers resist change. Meanwhile, violations of the UN Charter by powerful countries continue to erode the effectiveness of the United Nations. Therefore, a call for democratizing the UN began with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Since the meeting of the Heads of Government of the Security Council on 31 January 1992, a global debate on the restructuring of the UN System has begun. Many proposals have been made in this regard. The main objective of such reform proposals is to make the UN, specially its Security Council, more democratic, efficient and adaptable to the changing international milieu. Since the UN responsibilities and concerns are world-wide and are now expanding to virtually every conceivable area of human activity, it is imperative to re-design the UN structure so that it can meet the challenges of the 21st century.

One of the suggestions included that the Security Council (SC) should be expanded from 15 to 23 or 24, out of which 5 should be additional permanent members – two industrialized countries (Japan and Germany), and three large developing countries (Brazil, India and Nigeria). Names of South Africa, Egypt are also discussed for permanent membership of the Council. More than 25 years have passed since the debate of expanding Security Council began, no consensus has emerged among veto possessed P5 (five policemen of the world) to come to any conclusion, as they enjoy special status currently. They are not agreeing for Security Council expansion to include emerging nations to be part of the executive body of UN. Resolving the issue has proved impossible till now. There is no agreement on what process or formula should be used to determine who would get new permanent seats. There are three likely African candidates for permanent membership (Nigeria, Egypt, and South Africa). Countries (such as Pakistan) know that a rival (such as India) is more likely to be a candidate tends to oppose adding any permanent seats. Thus, Italy opposes a seat for Germany, and Argentina challenges Brazil's candidacy. The US endorsed India for a permanent seat in 2010; China has opposed seats for both India and Japan. The Chinese position explains how interests of all P5 states prevent Security Council reform. China champions Latin American and African participation as indicative of its support for developing countries, but opposes more participation from Asia. Not surprisingly, China opposes any reforms linked to democratization. In short, China prefers to keep the

size of the Council small, to maintain its veto for historic reasons, and to be the sole representative of a major continent.

It may be recalled that in advance of the World Summit in 2005, Kofi Annan and a number of member states pressed hard to get a resolution passed. Four countries that have quietly campaigned for permanent seats in the Security Council – Japan, Germany, India, and Brazil – went public on the issue in an effort to line up votes. This Group of Four suggested a 24 member Security Council, including six permanent seats, four of which would be reserved for them. The African Union supported a different plan, adding eleven seats, two of which would be reserved for Africa. Still another group of middle powers – including Italy and Pakistan, proposed a 25 member Security Council with 10 rotating seats. The US has not taken a position on the veto for any new members.

There is an alternative view which argues that the objective of Security Council reform should be to make it more ‘representative’ rather than more ‘democratic’. Commonly the claim that the Security Council should be more representative means affording greater representation to certain categories of historically unrepresented States. There is merit in this view. Contemporary geo-political realities will reflect if the composition of Security Council is expanded. The world population and the GDP of the emerging states should be represented in the Council’s permanent and semi-permanent members. The Security Council should not only reflect greater diversity but also should give place to underrepresented regions, such as the Americas, Asia, and Africa. It must be recalled that only six countries from Asia and Africa were founding members of the UN, but they now make up more than half of the UN membership. Therefore, the claim of these Afro-Asian states is very strong to be ignored.

In short, there is no agreement precisely because the issue of representation in Security Council is so important. As Edward C. Luck, pointed out:

It involves profound and persistent divisions about which and how many countries should sit around the table, whether permanent status should be extended; what the balance among regions and groups should be; whether the veto should be retained, modified, or eliminated; how decisions should be made; and whether its working methods should be further refined The very fact that none of this has been resolved ... testifies ... to the divergent perspectives and interests among member states, and to the value capitals place on the work of the Council.¹⁴

Despite the frustration and disappointment in some quarters when the 2005 discussion came to naught, the issue persists. “It would be

a grave error for those who think that Security Council reform will go”, Nirupam Sen of India said. “They believe it would be like the Cheshire cat, where you have the smile without the cat, but they will find that the cat has nine lives”.¹⁵ The lesson is that formal reforms such as this are difficult to achieve and likely to take long time. However, some administrative reforms were carried out by trimming the Secretariat during the tenures of Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon.

Summary Observations

This article has argued that the UN has emerged as a global democratic organization during its 74 years of existence. During all these years, its policies, programmes, and functions are centered on the objective of welfare of “We the People of the United Nations” – be they its peace-keeping functions, social development of people through MDGs, SDGs, and human rights treaties. It has been taking care of refugees, addressing issues of extreme poverty, famines, draughts, and natural disasters. In performing these functions, the UN elicits partnership of NGOs and civil society organizations – making it as a global democratic institution. Moreover, the UN has provided various forms of electoral assistance to more than 100 countries. Thus it has been promoting democracy at national level among its member States. Unless the UN succeeds in reforming and expanding the Security Council, its most powerful organ having the responsibility of maintaining international peace and security through the doctrine of collective security, it cannot be said to have achieved the objective of transforming itself truly as a democratic international organization. Unless the P5 agrees to expand the Security Council to make it more representative and democratic to reflect the changed geo-political world of 21st century, the UN cannot come of age.

Endnotes

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