

Reform or Counterrevolution at the UN?

By Ian Williams | August 7, 2006

Although the American media generally depicted Kofi Annan's end-of-term reform package for the United Nations as a failure, its achievements are by no means negligible. The cup is certainly more than half full. Frankly some of the "failures," such as reform of the Security Council, were not only entirely predictable but relatively benign as well. Above all, the successful adoption of the "Responsibility to Protect" at last year's summit far outweighs any perceived or alleged failures in mere administrative reform. Such a framework of principles to protect human rights goes directly to what many of the world's people expect of the organization.

In diplomacy, apart from carrying a big stick, it helps to speak precisely and frame the discourse. Sadly, the moment it started talking about "reform," the UN allowed itself to be sucked into a tendentious American congressional agenda. "Reform" implies an existing state of insupportable corruption and inefficiency. Such a rhetorical framing has allowed American legislators and editors to attack the UN for "waste, mismanagement, and corruption."

Of course, such inefficiencies do exist in the UN system, but in fairness, far less so than in the average American municipality, let alone the U.S. federal government. The recent report on how the U.S. government let billions of dollars of the "Oil for Food" surplus run away into the sands was far more damning than anything proven against the UN. But this report met with almost complete silence.

The U.S. Congress has called on the UN to modernize its procedures. The UN could certainly improve matters in this regard, especially in its personnel practices. However, the substance of congressional demands reveals that "UN reform" is a scarcely concealed invitation to accept Washington's dictate on every issue.

Reflecting the powerful American domestic lobby that pushed for withholding dues from the UN over twenty years ago, Congress wants the UN to stop criticizing Israel and, in effect, dismantle the apparatus of resolutions that the rest of the world sees as a framework for a Middle East peace agreement. It is said that one of the attractions of academic politics is that participants pay no price for their folly. Similarly, Congress can attack or propose "reforms" for the UN, win political and financial support, and incur little penalty from the silent majority who, polls show, actually think the organization is a good thing.

Since it is probably too late to reframe the debate away from "reform," the UN is doomed to a perpetually unrequited struggle to live up to the expectations it has publicly espoused. The UN Secretariat cannot ignore demands from its largest contributor. And in the present parlous state of UN/U.S. relations, the UN is not in a position to call attention to this underlying congressional strategy (though the candid remarks of U.S. Ambassador John Bolton often confirm the worst suspicions of the global south that the reforms are a takeover plot by the North in general, and the United States in particular).

A Fine Balance

Kofi Annan's negotiating genius has been to balance institutional and functional changes in the United Nations system against aid and trade concessions for the developing world. One of the payoffs for the global south was the success of Annan's team in bypassing John Bolton's resistance and getting the commitment of the world community and even from George Bush, for the social and development targets of the Millennium Development Goals (even though it may be as hard a job again to implement the commitments).

Another achievement has been the reinterpretation of international law and the UN Charter to incorporate the "Responsibility to Protect," a recognition that the international community and the UN not only have the right, but the duty, to intervene when states fail to protect their citizens. Of course, there is a long distance from acceptance of the principle to its application, as the continuing horrors in Darfur and the new ones in Lebanon demonstrate. But to get states such as China, Sudan, and indeed Bolton's United States to accept the principle will almost certainly go down as Kofi Annan's greatest achievement. It reflects the

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occidentocentric view of “reforms” that neither the MDG, nor the Responsibility to Protect, is usually counted as a reform success.

A third major change has been the replacement of the Human Rights Commission, where many countries clustered precisely to thwart examination of their human rights records, with the Human Rights Council. The new body’s adoption of the principle of universal examination of national records was a welcome break with tradition.

After voting against the creation of the Council, the United States declined to seek membership—which was either a show of displeasure or a realistic awareness of John Bolton’s popularity. In keeping with past practice, the Bush administration didn’t bother to criticize the African group for adopting a slate of candidates that included Morocco and Egypt, because these are, in FDR’s terms, “our” human rights offenders.

Many American critics of the Council naively hoped that it would stop criticizing Israel. Those hopes were immediately dashed by a special session that did just that. As long as Israel provides its critics with so much ammunition, the Council will not likely give Israel a break, which suggests as well that it will be equally strict with other future offenders.

Beyond Bureaucracy?

Set against the qualified success of the HRC is the most visible failure, the reform of the Security Council. As I argued last year, this possibly has more to do with the national machismo of aspirant permanent members than with how efficient or representative the body is. It is precisely these contending ambitions of potential members that prevent expansion and other reforms.

Also at risk in this reform process is the influence of the General Assembly. One strategy of the “reformers” is to clear up “obsolete” mandates. There are indisputably far too many such mandates. Like the congressional resolutions criticizing the UN, there is little or no cost associated with supporting

new tasks. The lack of selectivity has led to a loss of power for the Assembly compared with the Security Council.

The global south is also right to suspect a hidden agenda of clearing out pro-Palestinian resolutions and departments in favor of neoliberal economic and social nostrums. Again, Ambassador Bolton has done little to mitigate such suspicions. But the global south would be better off making more positive counter-proposals. The world really can live without mandates to investigate UFO’s or support conservative front organizations (Bolton’s favorite when he was at the State Department).

UN critics, understandably, go after the managerial shortcomings of the organization, which are tied to personnel policies among other matters. Certainly a root-and-branch reform of the Office of Human Resources Management is in order. While under the current system many delegates from the global south try to get jobs in the organization for themselves or their protégés, the alternative of an independent international civil service should not be a strategy by which Washington handpicks supportive insiders.

In the end, however, a real “reform” of the United Nations should not be about bureaucratic details. We should not measure efficiency by how long a piece of paper stays in an in-tray but by how long it takes to implement vital political decisions. Middle East resolutions, Western Sahara, Darfur, the Balkans, Congo, and an interminably long list of similar tragedies, Lebanon being the latest, await the attention of the UN. As part of a real reform process, senior UN officials should begin to be less discreet and publicly “name and shame” states that are ignoring, defying, and frustrating mandates. If such an airing of grievances in public embarrasses some of the loudest critics of the organization, so much the better.

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